

Luzia Hürzeler

&

Guests

What

Appears

to Be

Nature

For 20 years, the Solothurn artist Luzia Hürzeler has been working on the representation of animals and the cultural ideas that people associate with them. She critically examines how animals are presented in natural history museums, zoological gardens, or in art, and in her photographs, videos, and installations, and she puts into question the meanings attributed to them.

The exhibition invites visitors to trace how «images of nature» are constructed and to explore alternative perspectives. Originally opened in 1902 as «Museum of Art and Science», our museum has already featured wolves, birds, or gorillas in the past and is now doing so again. Whether Hürzeler is dealing with taxidermied birds from the Solothurn region, her own deceased cat, the gorilla diorama from the Natural History Museum in Bern, with wolves and their transformation from symbols of the wilderness to museum specimens, or with circus or zoo animals in artificial environments – her driving force is the moment of encounter between humans and animals.

She often starts with meticulous research and exchange with experts from various fields of knowledge. Hürzeler works in archives, she travels, studies regional history, connects with people whose lives are directly or indirectly linked to animals, and she examines the resulting networks between humans and animals. From the very beginning, she has made her own experiences and «self-experimentation» a part of her artistic strategy. *Was sich als Natur zeigt (What Appears to Be Nature)* is mostly human-made and encompasses structural power dynamics as well as ideas and fears related to life, death, or the passage of time. The artist deliberately subverts categories such as «fiction» or «documentation» in order to explore new relationships and encounters. Questions about aesthetic, historical, political, and moral involvement inevitably arise, with us right in the middle of it all.

The exhibition spans the entire ground floor of Kunstmuseum Solothurn and features works from the museum's own collection interwoven with other artistic positions from Switzerland and

abroad. This selection of works exploring the relationships between humans, animals, and nature from various angles was curated together with Hürzeler, and it promises a variety of perspectives on highly topical issues. Among the artists featured are: Sammy Baloji, Richard Barnes, Gabriela Bettini, Balthasar Burkhard, Marie José Burki, Max Doerflinger, Urs Eggenschwyler, Candida Höfer, Alain Huck, Jürg Kreienbühl, Rémy Markowitsch, Meret Oppenheim, Hannes Rickli, Ernst Georg Rüegg, and Hiroshi Sugimoto.

Biography

Luzia Hürzeler (b.1976) studied fine arts at the École supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Geneva and at the renowned Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, UK, where she earned a Master of Arts in Fine Art. She received a PhD in 2017 from the Hochschule der Künste and the Universität Bern as part of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) project “Wir sind im Winterschlaf!”, combining fine art and social anthropology. From 2017 to 2019, Hürzeler led the research project “Qui a vu le loup? Genèse et déconstruction d’une représentation” at the École de design et haute école d’art du Valais. She is currently in the process of completing her second research project, again supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation, at the Bern Academy of the Arts: “Africa behind glass. An artistic and ethnographic study of the production, presentation and maintenance practices of the Bernese diorama collection”. Hürzeler has presented her work in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Switzerland and abroad, including the solo exhibition *Aus dem Auge (Out of Sight)* at the Nuremberg Institute for Modern Art (2011) and at Kunstmuseum Solothurn (2010).

→ www.luziahurzeler.ch

E Entrance

Right at the start of the exhibition, Luzia Hürzeler draws attention to a seemingly casual scene: Pigeons and sparrows are pecking at bread. The loaf of bread is shaped to blend perfectly into the Geneva city skyline seen in the background. The *Vogelhaus* (Birdhouse, 2005–6) becomes a place where people and animals come together, evoking issues such as the design of shared living spaces.

Room 1

For the first time, Luzia Hürzeler is presenting the results of her in-depth study of a gorilla in a multi-part, multimedia production. The gorilla was killed in 1927 by the Basel big-game hunter Eric Miville in what was then the Belgian Congo, and it has been on display in a diorama at the Natural History Museum in Bern since the 1930s. In *Das Bild, in dem wir uns treffen* (The Image in Which We Meet, 2026), a life-size photograph of the stuffed gorilla faces a video projection showing a journey from Bukavu to what is now Kahuzi-Biéga National Park, ending precisely at the spot where the gorilla was killed. Hürzeler sets her search for clues in the present, using video interviews to give a voice to those involved. The artist herself did not travel to the Congo; the videos were produced in close collaboration with a local team. At the same time, Hürzeler's research traced the origins of that particular diorama in Bern back to the colonial past of dioramas and similar presentations of gorillas in general. The artist investigated the first encounters between people from the Global North and gorillas, and she searched for texts and images that tell these stories. A selection of these documents has been compiled into a collage in the folding book *Wo das Bild anfängt* (Gorilla-Diorama in Bern) (Where the Image Begins (Gorilla Diorama in Bern), 2026). Two lithographs make up the diptych of 2026, *Der Gorilla im Dschungel* (Bern und Tshivanga) (The Gorilla in the Jungle (Bern and Tshivanga)). One shows the gorilla in the Bern diorama; the other shows one of its descendants in what is now Kahuzi-Biéga National Park, a region where severe sociopolitical and humanitarian crises are shaking and threatening both the population and the landscape.

Room 2

Habitat dioramas are installations depicting scenes from nature, where objectivity and imagination, scientific insight, and artistic creativity interlace. Although committed to scientific realism, they illustrate an idyllic nature that never existed as such. In the late 19th and early 20th century, natural history museums in the USA and Europe turned to this widely popular and highly descriptive medium that nonchalantly merged science and art. Many institutions provided hunters, taxidermists, landscape painters, and technicians with lavish means to conduct costly expeditions and realize the impressive sceneries. Often described as 'windows into nature', dioramas are, in truth, illusions. It is not without irony that the US-American photographer Richard Barnes (b. 1953) takes aim at the magic of display cases, capturing in his large-format photographs precisely those moments when dioramas are being set up, repaired, or cleaned. Barnes is particularly interested in their construction: Lighting, perspectives, and materiality take center stage – and cause our perception of authenticity to waver.

The Congolese artist Sammy Baloji (b. 1978) explores colonial history, the staging of nature, and power relations in his diptych. His starting point is Virunga National Park in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, an area that is both a sanctuary for gorillas and a geopolitically contested zone. One of the photographs shows Carl Akeley's famous gorilla diorama at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, which renders a romanticized depiction of mountain gorillas in an undisturbed volcanic habitat. Baloji's other photograph was taken in 2013. It shows the Bulengo refugee camp on the outskirts of Goma located exactly in front of the same volcanic silhouette in the background of the diorama. The artist examines how Western institutions frame and perpetuate the myth of the African wilderness, while the local population faces ongoing displacement and conflicts over resources. Situated between aesthetics and analysis, Baloji's diptych opens up a space to renegotiate issues of ownership, responsibility, and memory.

The Spanish-Argentine artist Gabriela Bettini (b. 1977) explores in her works how 19th-century pictorial traditions have accompanied – and at times even legitimized – the dynamics of appropriation, exploitation, and transformation of landscapes. *Chuquicamata III* (2021) and *Pabellón de Pica* (2019) address the destructive consequences of mining in northern Chile, where the extraction of raw materials has deeply altered the original topography.

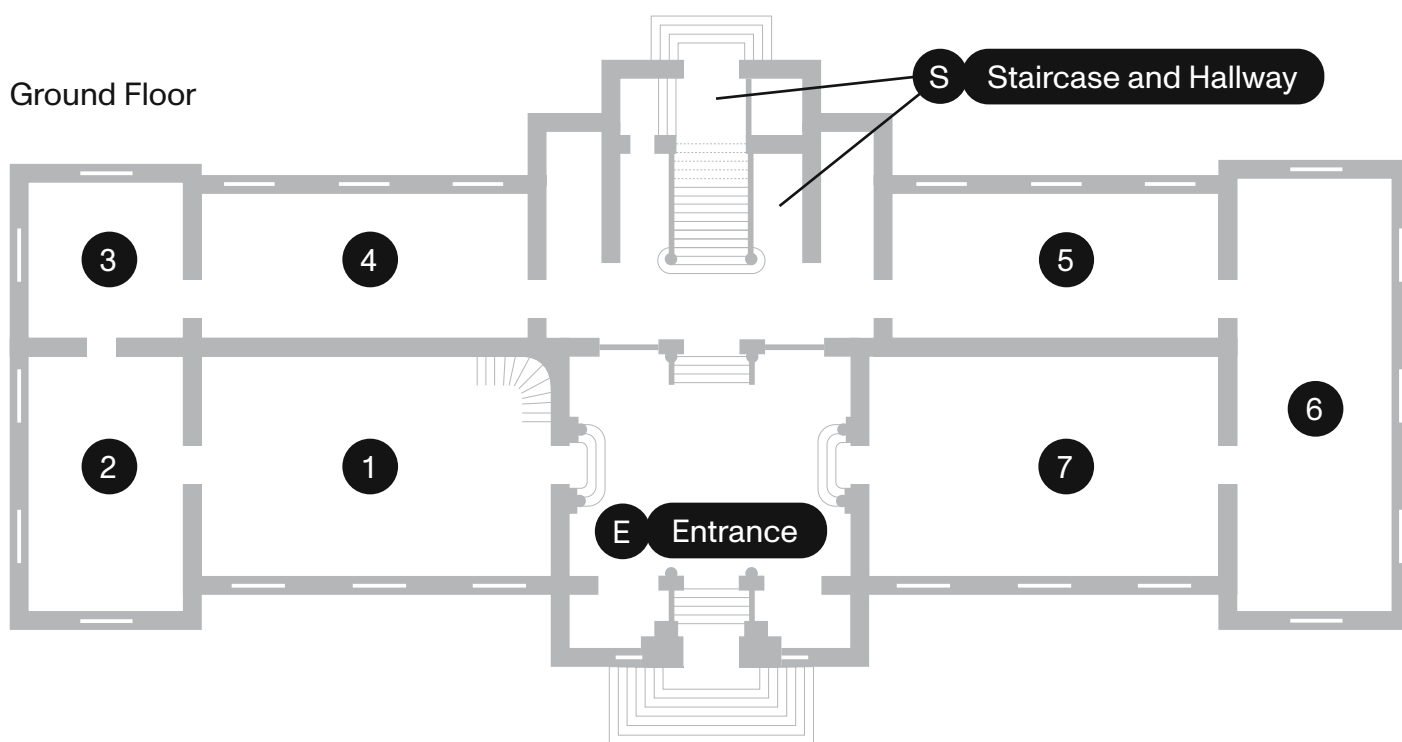
Both works bring current realities into a dialogue with idealized images of South American landscapes from times past. Two distinct forms of constructing landscapes are thereby linked: one that is shaped by the exploitation of resources, and another that emerged from the tradition of landscape painting. Profound transformations become visible – such as mountains that have been leveled or vegetation that has been replaced by barren, homogeneous plains.

Room 3

Luzia Hürzeler has long been interested in systems of order or classification and how they shape our relationship with other living beings. She created the *Die Ordnung der Vögel* (*The Order of Birds*, 2026) specifically for this exhibition and in collaboration with Naturmuseum Solothurn. Her installation references the city's natural history collection formerly displayed on the ground floor of today's

Kunstmuseum Solothurn. When the Naturmuseum was moved to its current location on Klosterplatz in the late 1970s, many specimens were stored in the attic of the municipal police station. They were transferred to a modern storage facility only recently. Hürzeler accompanied the preparatory work and, together with Aufdi Aufdermauer, she documented on film the cleaning, photographing, packaging, and moving out of the bird specimens.

The result are six videos, each dedicated to a different bird species, and each presented on a monitor placed together with the corresponding specimen in its original case from the attic storage. In the scientific practice of biology, a specimen without a label is worthless; it only becomes scientifically relevant with specifications such as the place and date of death. Hürzeler additionally visited the sites in the surroundings of Solothurn where the bird specimens had been found in order to trace what the landscapes look and sound like today. Her glimpse behind the scenes of museum



E Luzia Hürzeler

T Luzia Hürzeler, Max Doerfliger

1 Luzia Hürzeler, Meret Oppenheim

5 Luzia Hürzeler

2 Sammy Baloji, Richard Barnes, Gabriela Bettini

6 Luzia Hürzeler, Balthasar Burkhard, Marie José Burki, Urs Eggenschwyler, Candida Höfer, Alain Huck, Hiroshi Sugimoto

3 Luzia Hürzeler, attributed to Johann Caspar Füssli the Elder

7 Luzia Hürzeler, Rémy Markowitsch, Hannes Rickli, Ernst Georg Rüegg

4 Jürg Kreienbühl, Marie José Burki, Rémy Markowitsch

operations leads to an engagement with insights, conclusions, and interpretations offered by natural science collections, both past and present.

Room 4

The Basel artist Jürg Kreienbühl (1932–2007) moved to Paris as early as 1956 and painted what others preferred to overlook: Garbage dumps, shacks, suburbs, workers, the victims of progress. In 1981, he was invited to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris to visit the *Galérie de Zoologie*, which had been closed due to disrepair since 1965. Kreienbühl was immediately fascinated by this place, which – whether because or despite its dilapidated condition – still offered a spectacular sight with a surreal appeal. The gallery had already sparked enthusiasm when it opened in 1889: «The largest of animals (...) are arranged on the ground floor in an original and artistic manner, unlike what we are used to seeing in natural history collections (...). The intention to make the exhibition as visually appealing as possible met with success. For a moment, the stuffed animals appear to be alive in this big space (...)» (Alexis Lemaitre). Much like a reporter and documentary filmmaker, Kreienbühl captured this run-down cultural monument, which had once been intended to give people a sense of their anthropological superiority. The zoological gallery was in fact restored and reopened in 1994 by President Mitterrand under the new name *Grande Galerie de l'Évolution*, with a new exhibition design to replace the historical layout.

The Swiss artist Rémy Markowitsch (b. 1957) repeatedly explores techniques of superimposition and x-ray screening in his works. He is a passionate collector of visual and archival material, which he appropriates and transforms into art. For his central series *Nach der Natur* (*After Nature*, 1991–1998), Markowitsch both in the literal and figurative sense examined visual interpretations of plants, animals, humans, and landscapes.

He uses books on Africa from the early 20th century, for example, or a guide for home nursing courses published in 1944, during the war. Markowitsch's approach involves screening two motifs and then photographing, enlarging, and printing them on the front and back of a page to overlap and thereby form ambiguous visual codes.

Animals play a central role in a number of the early works by the Swiss artist Marie José Burki (b. 1961). She neither assesses nor dramatizes them, nor does she narratively embellish them. The artist rather uses this unbiased view of the animal world to decipher visual codes and show how humans

construct their environment and nature. The animals in this context often serve as a mirror for human existence and our perception of time. In *Blindsight: Hibou* (1993), a (video) image in the shape of a sharp-eyed owl stares back at us with everyday scenes reflected in its irises and pupils. Who is looking at whom? Where do the images come from? Are we seeing reality or are we seeing what we take to be reality?

S Staircase and Hallway

Luzia Hürzeler's *Die Forelle* (*The Trout*, 2012) is one of her most frequently exhibited video installations. In one picture, the artist's head and shoulders are visible; in the other, a trout is swimming in the water. Initially, the two scenes seem calm and stable, but gradually, the water level – and along with it, the fragile balance – begins to waver. While the view of Hürzeler fills with water, and the air to breathe becomes increasingly scarce, the water in the fish video opposite drops to an alarmingly low level. In this powerful portrayal of interdependence and differing perspectives, both the animal and the human find themselves in an existential situation that is only resolved at the very last minute.

The selection of prints by the Solothurn photographer Max Doerfliger (b. 1929) dates back to 1979, to the time when the former municipal museum founded in 1902 as a classical art and science museum was transformed into a museum dedicated solely to art. The natural history collection subsequently moved to its current location on Klosterplatz.

Room 5

Luzia Hürzeler's interest in capturing life and its transience is already evident in her early works, for instance, in the slide projection *30 Jahre* (*April 1984 und 2014*) (*30 Years* (*April 1984 and 2014*)) of 2014, in which the artist revisits a photographic scene from her childhood. Three decades later, she is photographed again with her sister in the same spot and in the exact same pose – both times by her father. Hürzeler merges the shots into a cross-fade. It is precisely the formal congruences that reveal the differences in time: Memory manifests itself not as a static retrospective, but as an interplay of repetition and change.

Her engagement with the relationship between remembering and forgetting continues in *Ne réveillez pas le chat qui dort* (*Let Sleeping Dogs Lie*, 2016), however, with the focus shifted from the human counterpart to the (domestic) animal. The

cat, now presented taxidermied in a display case like a sleeping sculpture, lived with the artist for years: a rendering of familiarity and distance at the same time. Just like the title evokes the proverb suggesting to «let sleeping dogs lie», sleep here represents a liminal state in which life and death intertwine. Seen in this context, Hürzeler's long-standing involvement with the wolf, which is present in many of her works, takes on an additional twist. The artist has been exploring images and concepts sparked by the wolf that inform our (supposed) knowledge about the animal. *How to Sleep Among Wolves* (2014) originally emerged from a plan to place a life-size sculpture of herself in a sleeping pose in a wolf enclosure at Zurich Zoo in order to sleep among wolves in a metaphorical sense and film the animals' reaction. She sat for the artist Rudolf Rempfler to create this sculpture over several months. When it turned out that it would not be possible to realize the project, she conceived *How to Sleep Among Wolves* as an installation at the museum instead. The encounter between sculpture and wolf is thus shifted into the viewer's imagination and into the artist's dream world.

Room 6

The ground sculpture *Addition de l'homme aux bêtes* (2014–15) by Alain Huck (b. 1957 in Vevey) explores the relationship between trace and presence.

An imprint of his sleeping cat in the ferns is preserved on a reflective steel plate, serving not least as a reminder of the cat's absence. The work can be interpreted as an echo of Hürzeler's works in which she explores sleep as a state between life and death.

The video *In the Same Place* (2024) by Luzia Hürzeler transports viewers back to a time when it was not unusual to encounter processions of horses or elephants in urban environments. The starting point is a series of black-and-white photographs from 1954 that document circus horses being unloaded from a train and led through the Praille neighborhood of Geneva. After a temporal leap into the present, the artist and another person enter the scene, leading two horses in the opposite direction to the Lancy-Pont-Rouge train station. There, the animals are confronted with historical film footage on a large video wall in a juxtaposition of different eras that culminates in an unsettling *mise en abyme*. Notably horses played a central role in human societies as means of transportation and work animals for thousands of years. They were indispensable well into the 19th century, particularly for the functioning of industrialized cities. These days, road traffic no longer even allows for horses without riders, as Hürzeler was to find out when she had to negotiate the filming permit with the city of Geneva. The artist's reenactment thus also becomes an exploration of how certain forms of coexistence between humans and animals over time gradually disappear from everyday life.

The interplay between historical perspective and contemporary experience resonates in different ways within the exhibition. The Swiss photographer Balthasar Burkhard (1944–2010) started working on a series of life-size animal photographs in the mid-1990s. By depicting the camel and the horse in black and white against a neutral background, the animals are imbued with a certain timelessness. Reminiscent of formal portraits, the focus shifts to the horse's physical presence, from a generalized perspective to a perception of the individual, each with its own distinctive characteristics.

Marie José Burki (b. 1961) depicts a dog in an isolated setting: in *Les Chiens/aux bâtards* (1994), the animal becomes a canvas for desires and anthropomorphism. A mixed-breed dog looks

directly at the viewer, while the accompanying audio track endlessly recites the names of dog breeds. Systematics encounters an image that categorically defies classification. With a touch of irony, Burki raises the issue of how categorization shapes our understanding of other living beings.

A series by German photographer Candida Höfer (b. 1944) centers around man-made habitats for animals. Her photographs of zoo architecture depict elaborately designed enclosures from around the world, where the animals themselves play a minor role. Instead, the attention is drawn to the built structures that simulate nature yet are clearly and at first glance recognizable as artificial landscapes. The eccentric Solothurn artist Urs Eggenschwyler (1849–1923), who was one of the pioneers of ‘lifelike’ zoo enclosures and who even walked lions on a leash through Zurich’s Niederdorf, sets his *Panther im Urwald* (*Panther in the Jungle*, undated) in lush vegetation – which he never saw with his own eyes, however. This tension between illusion and construction ultimately reaches its peak in *Alaskan Wolves* (1994) by Hiroshi Sugimoto (b. 1948). The Japanese artist’s strikingly realistic photograph initially appears to be a nature shot, but turns out to be a view of a diorama at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Taxidermied wolves are displayed there in a carefully staged landscape against a painted backdrop in a display case that suggests authenticity.

Room 7

What can we learn about the eight wolves that have died in Valais since the 1990s and are now preserved as taxidermy specimens in museums? In what amounted to a criminological investigation, Luzia Hürzeler set out to trace the path from the specimen back to the living animal. How and where did the animals live? Where and how did they die? How did they end up as specimens where they are today? The centerpiece of the installation *En dernier lieu* (*In the Last Place*, 2019) consists of eight lighted displays with exhibits on both sides: On one side is the image of the stuffed wolf, and, on the other side, its place of death appears.

Six of the eight wolves were legally shot with official permission; one was killed by a poacher; and another was struck by a snowplow. Hürzeler’s installation is reminiscent of exhibits in natural history museums. The artist meticulously reconstructed the shooter’s position and took a photograph from the same perspective. However, her interest does not lie with those responsible for the death. It is rather the ‘last place of life,’ as she herself puts

it, that prompts questions about the lives and habitats of wild animals in this day and age. The artistic research project *Qui a vu le loup* (*Who Saw the Wolf*, 2019) broadens the perspective to include various forms of knowledge production. In video conversations the artist led with experts in wildlife research, genetics, collection techniques, and monitoring, it becomes clear that our knowledge about the wolf is comprised of a variety of perspectives and practices, some of which are contradictory.

Crafted from traditional deerskin pants, Rémy Markowitsch’s (b. 1957) stag bellowing, «... hast du meine Alpen gesehen?», (2013), exposes the familiar image of the Alpine idyll as a construct. The question addresses idealized landscape images and their appropriation as well as it refers to the natural environment itself, which is coming under increasing pressure as a result of ecological changes.

Ecosystems in a state of change are also a relevant theme in the work of the Zurich artist Hannes Rickli (b. 1959). The two tableaux from *Atlas Ny-Ålesund, Spitsbergen* (ongoing since 2012) are part of a long-term artistic study on media use within a climate impact research project on Spitsbergen. While researchers collect data from the images to gain insights into the effects of warming waters on the habitat’s biota, the artist also gathers the faulty images in chronologically arranged, mosaic-like tableaux that allude to the conditions under which they were created as well as to the changes in nature.

Caution: Please do not touch the
artwork or the stuffed animals!

KUNSTMUSEUM SOLOTHURN

Kunstmuseum Solothurn Director and Co-Curator: **Katrin Steffen**; Curatorial Assistant and Co-Curator: **Tuula Rasmussen**; Head of Administration: **Andrea Galliker**; Collection and Restoration: **Anna Bürkli, Magdalena Ritler, Louise Wohlgemuth, Valeria-Santina Murgia**; Mediation: **Lena Weber, Claudia Leimer**; Technical Director: **Til Frentzel**; Technical Support: **Linus Baumeler, Luis De Angelis, Marco Eberle, Florian Dobruskin, Daniel Trutt, Elian Frentzel**; Video Technology: **Aufdi Aufdermauer, Karin Wegmüller, Martin Anner, Dimitri Fischer, Moritz Hossli, Nick Walter**; Accounting: **Stefan Gschwind**; Reception: **Beatrice Gerber, Stefan Gschwind, Nadja Lerch, Claudia Leuenberger, Alexandra Müller-Wusterwitz, Irène Roth Kradolfer, Sonja Santi, Susanne Wyss**; Cleaning: **Ondina da Graca Teixeira, Ana Queiros**; Design: **Raffinerie**; Editing: **Andrea Thode, Eva Bachmann**; Naturmuseum Solothurn: **Thomas Briner, Leiter; Andreas Schäfer, Head of the Vertebrates Collection**

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