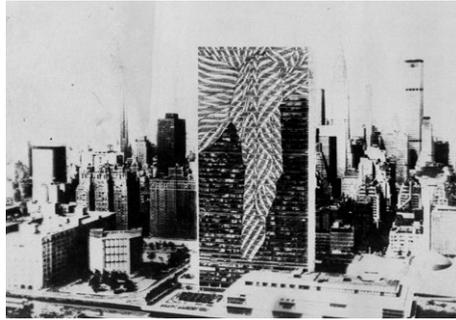


TRIX & ROBERT HAUSSMANN

Little bears inside things

INTERVIEW BY DANIEL MORGENTHALER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUKAS WASSMANN





They are known for putting a cape on the United Nations Building in New York (in a collage, at least), but how do they go about dressing their own home in Zürich, Switzerland?

Trix and Robert Haussmann, both architects, have lived close to the Lake of Zürich for 45 years. Opposing the widespread tendency of architects to tear down buildings in order to build new ones, the couple has been layering layer upon layer of their own design upon their typical working class house, initially used by the conductors of Zürich's very first tram. Since then, the house has become a place for them to live in, an office, an impromptu museum, and a mirror cabinet.

After I arrive we play a quick game inspired by Jean Arp's *loi du hasard*, in which the visitor to the house throws a cut-out circle, triangle, and square onto a white sheet of paper while Trix Haussmann takes pictures of the impromptu compositions. Then we delve into conversation about the art of collecting paintings that almost eat you, which of the two does the cooking and who designs the kitchens, and what it means to the Haussmanns when they say that they have found many 'little bears' in their life.





Walking through your house reminds me of a film I saw recently, *Garden State* by Zach Braff. There's a doctor that has so many diplomas that he has to hang the last one on the ceiling. Have you considered hanging your art on the ceiling as well? Every other piece of wall seems to be covered...

Robert: Maybe the floor would be a better option. It's interesting that a lot of people seem to have their diploma in the toilet. What you do not take too seriously, you put in the toilet.

At least you have time to read there. However, I didn't see any diplomas here, not even in the toilet. How do you go about hanging new works?

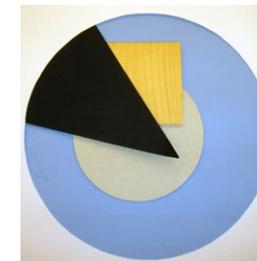
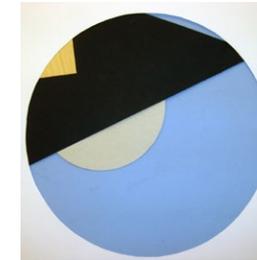
Trix: We have tried different principles. First we wanted to have the same frames for all paintings. But of course the artists didn't adhere to our frame size! So now it's more a matter of gut feeling. Robert usually goes about it very intuitively...

Robert: All I need is a bottle of champagne to hang a new painting... I still find it extremely difficult to describe why a painting looks good next to another one – or why not. We actually met for the first time while visiting an artist friend we both had in common, the sculptor Bernhard Luginbühl, who is known for his big iron works. The first works that we bought together were drawings by Luginbühl.

Trix: We both brought some works with us when we moved in to this house 45 years ago. We shared a certain taste from the start. We both seem to be interested in the stranger works of artists. Not the likeable ones, but the ones that show the true character of an artist. The ones that are not really meant to be looked at, or to be sold, but where something just had to get out. Like this monstrous rose by a friend of ours – it almost seems to eat you!

Robert: How we like it, but it's not likeable.

I've seen a lot of paintings dealing with optical illusions – like the ones you use in your own design work, too...



The results of our game of *loi du hasard*.

Trix: We mainly buy works with ideas that we did not have ourselves...

Robert: ...like this piece by Hugo Suter with the milk glass. This is really an idea that we never thought of. If you look at it from the front, it looks like a rose out of focus. But if you go behind it, you realise that the rose has been made up of used bottles of cleaning liquid. And if we had all the money in the world, we would of course have many Magrittes and de Chiricos on top of all that.

But now that there are many Swiss artists in your collection that you know personally. You must have a story to tell for each work of art in the house?

Robert: We do, yes. These Friedrich Kuhns for example, when I bought them from Friedrich I kind of functioned like a bank for him. Whenever he needed 100 Franks, he would come to our house to get them until I had paid off the painting in full. After that the next 100 Franks would serve as a pre-payment for the

next painting – that I was going to buy anyway.

Trix: Kuhn expressly did not want to receive all the money for a painting at once.

Seeing so many paintings together of course reminds me of the historical salon hang, but also of an image search on Google. Maybe the two are not that different after all...

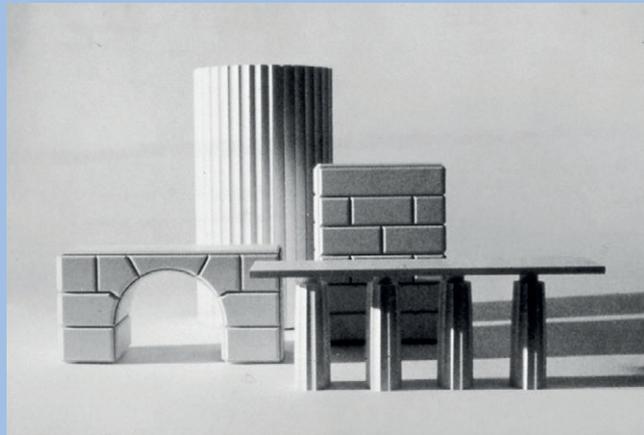
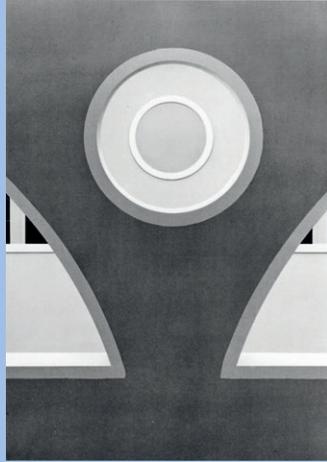
Trix: That's an interesting idea, but we have never thought about it.

Robert: Of course it would be nice to show the works with a bit more space, but we simply don't have any more.

Trix: We'll have to think about this more when we move out of the house. Our son is going to move in here with his family in the very near future.

Have you ever been asked by an institution to exhibit your collection?

Robert: We've never done it. It could result in an interesting double portrait—or even a double *psychogramme*—in an unusual medium.



Above: An detail of the Galleria Hamburg shopping mall, Hamburg, 1983.

Middle: The *Lehrstück I*, architectural forms as furniture, 1977.

Below (left): The boutique Courrèges, Zürich, 1970. Below (right): Another detail of the Galleria Hamburg, 1983.



The lobby of Hotel le Plaza, Basel, 1984.

This work by Alfred Hofkunst by the way, it's up there because it is exactly the same width as the painting below. It's a true to scale drawing of a perfectly normal scale of two metres in length. When I saw it, I knew that this was a perfect gift for my architect wife. However, Hofkunst made one mistake, it's 200 centimetres, but not exactly in the right order...

Trix: This is a kind of coincidence that we often see in our art collection, but that we also find useful in our design work. Robert has been working with the concept of coincidence a lot.

Robert: I firmly believe in Jean Arp's *loi du hasard* and share his conviction that art and

Robert: We have been influenced a great deal by literature. By Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle) writers like Georges Perec, Italo Calvino, and Umberto Eco for example. They show how to play with coincidence and how to break rules.

Trix: ...and how you can't break rules if you haven't constructed them first.

And what rules apply to your house? Which, by the way, also seems to be kind of a double portrait as a whole, doesn't it?

Trix: It is maybe more a room for experiments. For example, we wanted to find out how paint-



design can develop out of coincidences. In German the word 'coincidence' is 'Zufall'. It's what falls onto you, so to speak.

Is that why you ask every visitor to play a game where he or she lets cut-outs of three different forms fall onto a piece of paper whilst you take photo of the coincidental result?

Trix: That's really just a game that we are interested in right now...

Robert: ...and it shouldn't be taken too seriously. But of course it is a very conscious construct for playing with coincidence. And the results are always interesting and beautiful in some way!

So it's coincidence that follows certain rules...

ings can be hung on coloured walls. So we chose a different colour for each room of the house. Grey for the staircase, and blue, yellow, or green for the rooms. It took us about five years to complete this concept and to establish the rules that apply to it...

Robert: ...there was no real rush. Of course this colour concept does not apply to all types of architecture. In a house by Richard Neutra, with its flowing rooms, you couldn't colour one individual room. But in this house, with little boxes as rooms, it makes sense. You must know that I was a student of Johannes Itten, and I got to know his colour theory very well.

Trix: For most of our commissions, you decided on the colours. I always said I was colourblind. I was always so annoyed by the common as-







sumption that women always take care of colours and textiles...

Speaking of textiles, you have a curtain with yellow stripes on the balcony, to protect it from the sun. However, from far away it almost looks like a shower curtain to me. Is this one of your own designs, or did you kind of abuse a shower curtain for this outdoor use?

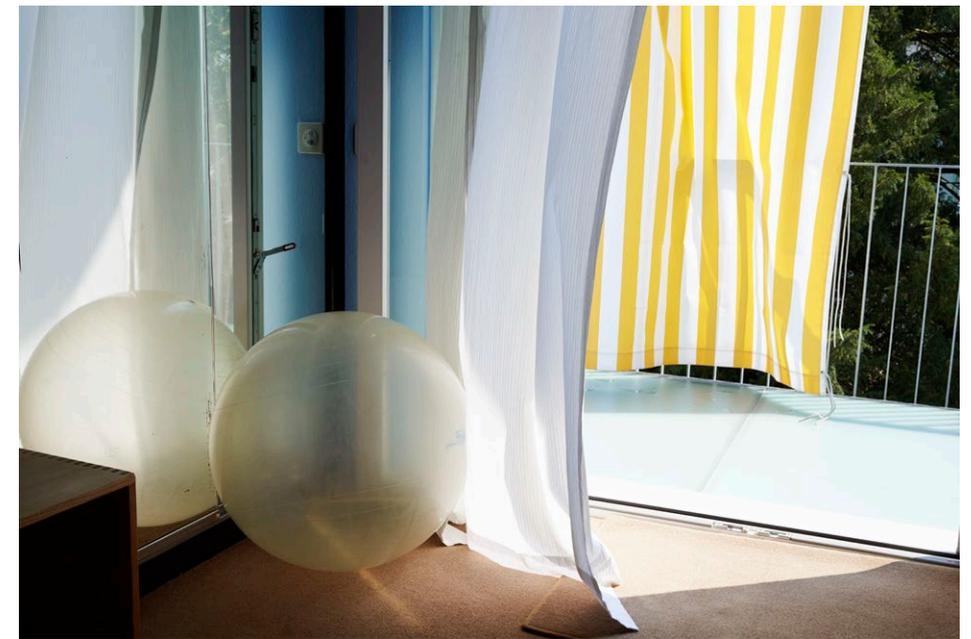
Trix: The textile is one that is also used for canopies or sunshades. But you are right, the rings it hangs from are also used for shower curtains. That was always our philosophy: if we can use something that already exists, we do not need to design it anew.

them. But when he asked Parrhasius to uncover his painting, it turned out he had painted a curtain so realistically that everyone thought there was a painting underneath it.

Trix: We like this story very much! *Trompe-l'œil* painting is a very important influence for us. And it's incredible how effective—and yet economic—it can be; like in the Villa Cigogna in Northern Italy.

Robert: There is a wall with simple stripes. But at the very bottom there is a more elaborately painted section, where you get the illusion that the whole wall is just a curtain and that behind it there is a landscape. It's like a lifted skirt...

Trix: It's also an important fact that methods of



Robert: For the curtains inside we had the rings made, because we wanted to avoid the standard board with rails in it. My preoccupation with textiles definitely has to do with the fact that I am the son of an upholsterer. I basically grew up between curtains.

But then you also translated the softness of textiles into harder materials...

Robert: That's right. Our curtains made of glass, or our curtains made of stone.

Your work always reminds me of the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius. The legend has it that they did a painting contest. Zeuxis had painted grapes so realistically that birds tried to eat

imitation are usually adopted for very specific reasons. Usually it's not even because they are less expensive.

Robert: Schussenried Abbey in Germany for example has about ten columns in orange and purple marble. If you want this colour, you need to have faux marble, because you won't find enough marble of the exact colour to produce all the columns. Even the Egyptians worked with *faux bois*! I wrote about the different techniques of what we called 'Critical Mannerism' in 1981. The different strategies of manneristic alienation. Some of them we have tried out in our everyday work. The Bauhaus for example, or modernism as a whole, never accepted such strategies.



The *Lehrstück II*, function disturbs form, 1978.



Above: *Dinnerplate Stripes*, Swid Powell Collection, New York, 1984.
 Middle: The *Lehrstück IV*, mirrored cupboard, partly covered with *Intarsia* of wood, 1978.
 Below: *Lounge Seating*, a homage to Mies van der Rohe's *Weissenhof Chair*, Knoll International, 1988.

One of the strategies you describe in *Manierismo Critico* is 'the creation of illusionary space created by mirroring'. You seem to have applied it to your house very often as well...

Robert: It is incredible what you can do with mirrors. This dining room here is four times its size only due to the mirrors on its walls. If you put mirrors in the reveals of windows like I have in the roof of my study room, you will double the amount of light inside the room. And if you put mirrors behind the books in a book shelf, it almost seems as if there is another room behind it. I mean, if this dining room only had pictures on the walls, it would be unbearably cramped.

Trix: That's not exactly true either. Do you remember when we repainted our staircase? We had to take off all the paintings and

all of a sudden the staircase looked extremely tight. Paintings, like mirrors, give width too.

Robert: They are eyes or windows, too, that's true. But I still cannot think of a single restaurant in Venice that does not have a mirror inside...

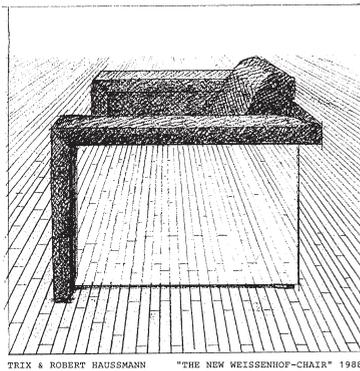
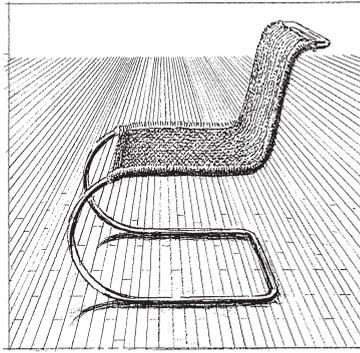
It is said that you often ate with your employees up here.

Trix: Robert cooks. I only design kitchens... But really, eating is also part of design. You eat with your eyes, too.

Robert: But isn't it interesting that the *mise-en-place* for a meal often looks much better than the food you eat in the end?

Trix: I often take pictures of the *mise-en-place* when Robert cooks. I must have several hundred photos... It's another of my many unrealised book projects.

That's interesting. Nowadays people tend to photograph the things they are about to eat and publish the picture on Facebook or Instagram. There's even the term 'foodporn' for it...



Above: A drawing of the 'Weissenhof chair' by Mies van der Rohe, 1928. Below: The 'New Weissenhof chair', by Trix and Robert Haussmann, 1988.

Robert: However, we have this tool called the 'log-O-rithmic slide rule' with which you can find unexpected combinations of words. So we shouldn't be surprised when someone asks us to, let's say, make 'rustic exposed concrete'...

And what would your house look like if you had to build it from scratch?

Robert: Shortly after we met, we wanted to realise both of our personal visions. Trix saw her house as a kind of cavern in the ground, with a hole towards the sky. I wanted a glass tower. It's almost impossible to get more diverse...

Trix: But nowadays, building seems to be more about sustainability, grey energy, and solar panels...

Perhaps your glass tower would actually have to be made out of solar panels these days...

Robert: That would be difficult. But it's true – healthy houses don't need to be ugly!

Trix: I think it's a very interesting challenge to find aesthetic principles that accommodate principles of sustainability.

Robert: But a lentil soup just does not look as nice as the ingredients that go into it. By the way, we already have a title for the book. We will call it *Haussmannskost!*

I wanted to ask you about your dream architectural commission. But it seems as if you have built it with your own house?

Robert: When I was 50, I did have some dreams. Commissions like the Palais Stoclet in Brussels by Josef Hoffmann. Where you could design everything from the forks to the roof. But at 80 years of age, I wouldn't want to do it anymore.

Trix: Maybe you don't want to do it anymore because it could also be very difficult. We have had many occasions where builders wanted to combine things that simply cannot be combined.





Maybe the sense of humour that is visible throughout your work can help there as well?

Robert: You can't always have fun in life. But you should always have fun in your work!

In the home, work and life seem to intermingle in quite an intense manner.

Trix: That's true, you can't separate the two here. I see that very clearly now that we have to deal with our personal archive for a book project. When I look at old rolls of analogue film, there is hardly any that have strictly personal or professional images on it. When one appears

to be mainly professional, all of a sudden a picture of our son shows up in there, and vice versa.

Robert: Images are very important for us. However, my wife always takes photographs, whereas I draw.

Trix: When Robert was away for professional reasons, he would send me drawings from the places he went to, as postcards. This is another small collection that makes for a great book.

Robert: And of course, images are also very important for our work. In order to arrive at collective solutions, you need to be able to share a set of common inner images and perceptions. It also has to do with education... with your interior library. If someone doesn't know who Magritte is, then at the end of the day all you can talk about is food or sex...

...which can be interesting too...

Trix: If you cannot find common inner images, we used to say, "With this person, it is never the right slide that falls into place." It is one of our code expressions. Like the one with the bears inside things and projects.

Bears? Where did you find bears?

Trix: Funnily enough, we can say that we have found a lot of bears in our life...

Robert: This is kind of a long story which we should probably explain. It all started with an idea of mine. We were working on a hotel in



Manierismo Critico, soft marble wall, a poster by Trix and Robert Haussmann for the 1982 exhibition in Milan.

Interlaken, and for the 'Chässtübli' (a room in which Fondue and Raclette is served) downstairs, I had the idea to furnish it with wooden Kama Sutra for bears. Similar to the one Tomi Ungerer did for frogs.

Trix: And there is a school for wood carvers in Brienz, close to Interlaken. A teacher there told us that when new apprentices arrive, he starts with the following exercise: he gives each student a block of lindenwood and says, "Listen carefully. A little bear is hiding in every one of these blocks. Now try and carve it out of the block." There was once

one student, however, that sat in front of a pile of wood shavings, saying sadly, "There was no bear in my block of wood." So whenever we had a rather tiresome commission, we kept asking each other, "Do you think there is a bear inside it?" Fortunately, we have found many a bear in our long career. They weren't always easy to find, but if you keep working at it, they will start come out eventually...

