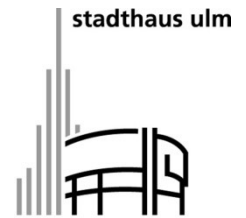


photography
30 June until 22 September 2024



Klaus Pichler: The Petunia Carnage



© Klaus Pichler

In May 1990, 30,700 genetically modified petunias have been planted on the premises of the Max Planck Institute for Plant Breeding Research in Cologne. The plants had been given a maize-gene, turning the petunias' petals salmon-coloured instead of white. This was the first time in Germany, that genetically modified plants were allowed to grow outdoors. This was preceded by lengthy parliamentary debates, elaborate approval procedures, and fierce protest by environmental activists. After the trial, all plants were destroyed to prevent the spread of the genetically modified petunias.

In May 2005 however, biologist Teemu Teeri, upon exiting Helsinki main station, discovered a bright orange petunia in a flower trough. He was surprised and took some stalks to analyse them in his laboratory. This chance encounter was the beginning of what later be called the 'petunia crisis,' leading to the destruction of all orange or salmon-coloured petunias all over the world.

The project 'The Petunia Carnage' by Viennese photographer Klaus Pichler is based on the true story of these orange petunias. It relates the consequences of Teeri's discovery, when DNA tests revealed that the orange petunias are transgenic, a product of biogenetics. It traces back to the origins of the orange plants, and their mysterious 'escape from the laboratory.' It explains why these orange Petunias were classified as 'illegal,' after they had been bred and sold without approval for more than 25 years, leading to their global mass-destruction in 2017 – until 2020, 143 variants of orange petunias had been found, all sharing the same gene sequence of the plants from the trial in 1990.

The story of the orange petunias is more than a scientific anecdote – it is a parable of what can happen when scientific interest, commercial marketing logic, public discourse, and unexpected coincidences clash.

'The Petunia Carnage' presents the chronology of this case point-blank, using photography, facsimiles, and artefacts, augmenting scientific fact and archival material with fictitious elements. Pichler's photographic tale is based on a collaboration with all relevant protagonists of the case of the orange petunias. They exchanged experiences, provided visual material, and granted access to their laboratories, where they are still allowed to breed orange petunias for research purposes.

As an eye-catcher, a large field of petunias will be installed in the Stadthaus for this exhibition – without genetically modified plants, of course.

Curator: Dr. Raimund Kast

Opening: Sunday, 30 June 2024, 11.30 am

Photographer Klaus Pichler and curator Dr. Raimund Kast in conversation
Livestream on Stadthaus – YouTube

Supporting program and Guided Tours in German Language, see German version