

PRESS RELEASE

**Milena Milosavljevic – Lost in Swarm**

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Roehrs & Boetsch is pleased to present Milena Milosavljevic's first solo exhibition "Lost in Swarm" at the gallery.

In recent years, fuelled by advancing digitalisation and online networking, the importance of groups and their dynamics within virtual communities such as social media have steadily increased. In her latest works – many of which were created specifically for this exhibition – Milosavljevic examines how a crowd responds to political and social content and how the people within this crowd communicate by looking closely at social media trends and contemporary communication.

At first glance, Milosavljevic's sculptural works surprise with their heavy physical presence. They are cast in concrete, chiselled out of stone, embroidered on cotton; their solid bodies are very real. This stands in stark contrast with the often ephemeral nature of their content such as contemporary communication, virtual communities and social media. Milosavljevic realises these topics in a range of materials, always looking for a new challenge and eager to find the material triggering the biggest impact. She not only provides the ideas for her works, but is also interested in the process of their creation, and thus produces the objects with her own hands. Her focus on materiality is an exceptional approach, enabling the artist to anchor her examination of the virtual in the real world and give a physical expression to fleeting subjects such as online communication.

One portion of the works in this exhibition comprises case studies of crowd dynamics such as "Crowd as a Mirror". In the five photographs the spectators all express the same emotions in perfect synchronisation, and let us guess the nature of the scene from their reactions to it. Through this, the artist reveals how our individuality dissolves in a crowd, and with it also our conscious personality. Instead of having independent agency, we become just a fragment of a group expressing the mood of the crowd. We forfeit part of our individuality and identity; we become lost in a swarm.

Nowadays, the term "swarm" is frequently used in computer science for programming the behaviour of robots such as drones to work as a crowd. For this, they are provided with a set of rules concerning their reaction in relation to their peers. Milosavljevic borrows this terminology for her examination of the dynamics of a human crowd. For instance, in "Spread the Love" she explores the Instagram trend of taking a picture showing your bare bottom in front of a conventional travel sight like a panoramic landscape. Like in programming a swarm, this trend gives you a set of rules, telling you to bare your bottom somewhere unexpected and take a picture of it. But even within these regulations, there remains some individual agency by the participants of the trend because they can add their personal touch by choosing the location and mode of the picture.

In the far biggest body of works for this exhibition, Milosavljevic explores the omnipresence of emoji in contemporary mass communication, their excessive use as a universal language, and the resulting misunderstandings and problems. One of these misunderstandings is the pile of poop emoji, as some people interpret its shape as chocolate ice cream or a cup cake topping. Not only do we add them to complete our messages, we can use them to react to stories instead of words. This way, entire sentences, words and emotions are compressed and condensed into one shape. But instead of adding weight to peoples' opinions, reacting through an emoji becomes an empty gesture due to their flippant and excessive use. By rendering them in heavy materials such as concrete, lime-like plastic or stone, Milosavljevic restores the weight of their meaning that has been lost in the endless repetition. She further invites us to change our perception of these familiar symbols through showing them in alien materials for our daily chat routine.

But there is also a political implication to the use of emoji. For "Blank", the artist deals with recent decision of Apple Inc. to change the gun emoji into the more harmless depiction of a water pistol in response to the ongoing debate on gun violence in the USA. Milosavljevic draws the outline of the original revolver-shaped emoji onto the wall, while a plexiglass shape of Apple's new water pistol symbol is installed on top of it. Viewing them from a distance, the glaring yellow of the water pistol almost makes the shape of the revolver disappear. With this work, the artist highlights the dependency of users on the design and repertory of their app providers. Instead of expressing our emotions, we select from the emoji provided, the only individuality lying in the choice of the shape but not in the actual design. Together with "Top 5", these works remind us of the underlying power structures of social media which regulate its crowds. But "Blank" also questions what impact changing a violently connoted emoji with its toy version really has on gun violence. Rather, do we not become more and more estranged from reality by depicting it as a cute, harmless symbol with glossy surfaces and clear outlines? Maybe this detachment is the real danger harboured by the use of emoji, as we increasingly consume our emotions in a sanitised, pre-prepared form designed by corporations, while losing our identity and individuality in swarm-like virtual crowds.

**Milena Milosavljevic** (1986, Serbia) is currently completing her studies in sculpture at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, Germany. The artist lives and works in Düsseldorf, Germany.

The topics of social behaviour, groups and contemporary communication are Milosavljevic's key focus and obsession. Her interests are closely related to the way a crowd responds to political and social content, and how the people within this crowd communicate. For her sculptures, the artist works in a variety of materials such as wood, carbonated objects, textiles, concrete and metal. Her works stand out for their exceptional physical presence, despite the often ephemeral nature of their content.

For further information, please contact Nina Roehrs ([gallery@roehrsboetsch.com](mailto:gallery@roehrsboetsch.com)) at the gallery.