

Films & Windows I-IV

07.06. - 25.08. 2012

Films & Windows (I)

Nadja Abt & Kerstin Braetsch

Opening Reception at MATHEW: 07.06.2012 / 19.00 - 22.00 CET

In 2005, five years after the editorial offices of TEXTE ZUR KUNST moved from Cologne to Berlin, they themed the 57th Issue "Berlin." In 1996 the editors gave the 24th Issue the title "Versprechen Berlin" (Promise Berlin). In looking through both issues it is noticeable that what could be marketed as promise in the mid-90s is by 2005 in part or more or less subsumed by the term "disillusionment" or even "disappointment": "In recent years a lot in the art location Berlin has become unappealing" (Texte zur Kunst, Forward of the 57th Issue, 2005, Isabelle Graw and Clemens Krümmel). Nadja Abt's video, "The Interview," is an attempt to convey the peculiarities of the "production location – Berlin" between 2006 and 2012. The perspective accrues from an interview with a non-German, most probably American artist who in the near or far future develops her version of Berlin over these years in retrospect. What was Berlin actually like back then, in the time when this exhibition – which we're seeing right now and for which I'm to write the introduction text – took place.

Interestingly enough the analysis of these years in Nadja Abt's "The Interview" particularly conveys the difference of Berlin in the 90s: "We really were hoping going to Berlin and finding the Berlin of the 90s and we just discovered it was a whole other place." If we were to take this topic seriously – that the current contemporary Berlin is composed in part by those transplanted participants from the entire world, who continue to come because of the mythology on the city in the 90s – then we would be in a situation in which the art world wants to live or experience something that is no longer possible or can only be synthetically replicated. And this promise is of old acquaintances that we meet again and again and continue to encounter in talk about Berlin: "Berlin was just the place where the art scene was so dynamic ... You could start a whole show around a dj set... etc..."

Aside from the fact that for the last 20 years Berlin has been described as an enduring and horrible amalgam of cultural activities, with an abundance of interesting people and internationals, an excessive nightlife and low-cost rooms, it is continuously and simultaneously described as the place where these possibilities and dynamic processes find themselves in a state of dissolution, if they haven't entirely vanished already: Then the investors came, then this or that was no longer possible or more difficult, it was all a big lie anyway, which graces the principle of self-reflexive exploitation, and others skimmed off the surplus value of all this work.

"The Interview" is particularly interesting because it formulates a diagnosis of the present from a fictitious and retrospective future perspective, while implementing an almost nostalgic "back then." What's also interesting in the film are the points in the interview that are about "ethics" and the supposed utopia of the production location – Berlin. These are people that find each other in cultural production through a common will for political change, who live off of generous and reciprocal elucidation.

Kerstin Braetsch's aesthetic praxis owes itself to similar contemplation of and reflection on the production aesthetics. For example, the collaborative work of "Das Institut" or "United Brothers." Here there is only a cursory reference that these projects are all interested in the concept of collaboration between various culture producers. This remains whether it's a concrete political concern, which should be formulated in performances or exhibition projects, or whether it's a collective work about reflecting on the conditions of production. That's how her works often arrive in other combinations of production, for example, in the performances of "United Brothers" or the publication and exhibition activities of "Das Institut."

In this sense Kerstin Braetsch's works are both autonomous works of art and tools for upcoming projects, which are applied in evolving collective work combinations.

Sigmar Polke's stained glass windows for the Großmünster in Zurich appear to serve as inspiration for Braetsch's works of glass. These windows consist of abstract patterns, which are made up of finely cut agates. However, they also consist of figurative scenes with Old Testament references. The windows are the last work that Polke realized before his death and appear to us today as works of a compressed and retrospective consequence of ideas.

The windows were finished by the same Swiss manufacturer that Kerstin Braetsch now uses to develop her glass works. Additionally the shards – each and every one – that remain from Polke’s finished agates form the source material of her works. While Polke instrumentalized the agates as a means to an abstract composition, Braetsch employs the discarded pieces to evoke her brush stroke-style from earlier paintings. However, her glass works can also be read as continuation of Polke’s endeavor that figure as composition by secondary usage. Braetsch’s secondary usage occurs from using leftovers, which is simultaneously an imitation of the work itself and a reference to the works of others; therefore they are doubly parasitic in both the sense of art history and in the sense of re-using and reevaluating the works of others. Polke’s windows are based on the classic antagonism of figure and field. Kerstin Braetsch gives up this relationship, which is constitutive of painting, in that the figure of her agates or stained glass, which make up the brush strokes, are laid on transparent glass so that the field is constructed by what’s behind that glass. It’s a principle that she already employed in her paintings on transparencies. Here, various layers we’re laid over each other; the individual transparencies are combined in a definitively coherent way. Thus, the layering refers to the whole composition in the area of contingency.

The transference and translation of painting into glass has a second aspect of aesthetic production. Working with this material demands a fundamentally different velocity as when working with paint by means of a brush on a surface. The glass has to be prepared in an elaborate and time-consuming process; its qualities are difficult to control because they are realized in a drawn out chemical (virtually alchemistic) process, and cannot materialize on the surface in “real time.” The work itself is only realizable in collaboration with workshop; Kerstin Braetsch must rely on the expertise, experience and patience of the glass manufacturer. She is melded with the manufacturer by the length of the production on the collaborative work. Yet it isn’t about the functional finished product, as it is with Polke. The composition process in the glass works is in itself visible. Each outline is already a product. The series in entirety as well as the individual objects of particular, multifunctional and applicable practical value is the goal.

Matthias Mühling