

Britta Thie

Scene

Opening: Friday, 28 April 2023, 6 – 9 pm

Exhibition: 28 April – 3 June 2023

Britta Thie's "Scene" is a study of repetition and reproduction, emotional and mechanical.

Paintings of lights, rigs, and gear that inhabit the sidelines of film sets form character studies for a universe in which the machinery has the personality. Screened amid this ensemble cast of technical infrastructure are videos of actors practicing what is known as the Repetition Exercise, pulling back the curtain on another suite of production tools typically kept out of view.

Writing in 1843, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard set out to "test the meaning and possibility" of repetition, believing it to be the key to happiness. He embarks upon an investigative journey via steamship to Berlin, attempting to recreate an experience he once had there. He does not succeed. "The only thing repeated," he concludes, chagrined, is "the impossibility of repetition." One might conclude the same from the videos in "Scene." The exercise they document is central to the Meisner Technique, which seeks to bring performers into their immediate environment by drawing from their experience of the other, not the self. As actors repeat the same short phrase back and forth, what is said acquires new tone and meaning with each return. Affirmations and question marks, tears and laughter – sundry and unpredictable affective swells – complicate and dissolve the possibility of a true, reproducible statement. Authenticity emerges not in content, but in emotion.

Bruce Nauman used a similar device to achieve extreme experiences in his videos from the late 1960s, performing mundane actions repeatedly in his studio to a point of machine-like meaninglessness – a kind of one-man variation of the Repetition Exercise, but one associated with the devolvement of the subject into automaton. Thie and her actors are not captive to this cycle. Far from automata, they become more human with each grueling rep. From the senseless impossibility of repetition, from the tensions inherent to its attempt, spring a well of "real" feeling.

Thie's paintings, too, locate humanity in the mechanical. The immersive environment they capture and create is informed by the artist's experience as an actor on set, where, while waiting for her scenes, she began to consider the objects around her – and found companionship in the machinery, personality in the technology. The paradoxical “present absence” of such tools invites questions of narrative, world-building, and deception (of oneself, and of one's audience). Representing the crucial and crucially invisible tools behind popular image production perturbs a cultural hierarchy that puts the individual in the spotlight above the spotlight itself, and leaves all human infrastructure in the shadows.

Repetition may be impossible, but mechanical reproduction is not. Walter Benjamin famously credited the image reproducibility enabled by technological progress with the loss of the artwork's aura. He wrote that the part of the actor performed for the camera “is acted not for an audience but for a mechanical contrivance,” causing “the aura that envelops the actor” to vanish and with it, “the aura of the figure he portrays.” By going behind itself, “Scene” looks to find such “lost” things by way of what is presumed to have made them disappear – to relocate the aura ostensibly destroyed by the means reproduction and the rational “sense” that vanishes in the act of repetition.

“The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths,” reads Nauman's canonical neon sculpture (1967) – a spiral that suggests the maxim is meant to be reprised as soon as the viewer is done reading it. Be it achieved by machines or proven unachievable by actors, repetition is a method of truth-seeking. Even Sanford Meisner, creator of the Repetition Exercise, described acting as an attempt “to live truthfully under imaginary circumstances.” Thie pursues truthiness by placing infrastructure above the story told, present emotions above “the plot.” Recording the Repetition Exercise itself is a portrayal of film's technical underpinnings. Each time the acting coach, off-camera but audible, interrupts the repartee with instruction, she joins the lighting and gear portrayed in Thie's paintings as an embodiment of filmmaking's technical scaffolds.

Thie uses the “slow” medium of painting to depict tools that enable a rapid-fire creation of digital imagery, yet the photo-realistic canvasses that result mimic the same product: the high-resolution visuals of contemporary film and television, where HD means “reality,” regardless of what's narrated on screen. Benjamin viewed the “equipment-free” world represented in film to be the

height of artifice. But rejecting the entire medium isn't the only way to access the "real." You don't get to authenticity by removing the equipment, "Scene" suggests. You get there by showing it.

Text: Victoria Camblin

Britta Thie (b. 1987, Minden) studied at Kunstakademie Münster and the Cooper Union in New York, and graduated from the Universität der Künste Berlin. Her works explore the treacherous geographies created by the endless flow of stylized and commodified images that define contemporary visual culture. Her notable video and multimedia works include the web series "Translantics," co-produced by ARTE and Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, considering the methods of image production and consumption that often go unseen. Thie lives and works in Berlin.