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Critical Melancholia

**Lutz Bacher
Isa Genzken
Anne Imhof
Michael Krebber
Henrik Olesen
Josephine Pryde**

with a footnote on the idea of natural history in Jack Smith

an exhibition organized with
Juliane Rebentisch

30 August - 7 October 2023



[Annotated Checklist](#)

Lutz Bacher

“The Color Red” (2014) is a work that dates from Lutz Bacher's first years in New York. It has never been exhibited before. However, the materials were titled, dated, and staged in various ways by Bacher in her studio. Where she obtained the materials from is not known. She likely found them at a scrapyard, like the other industrial materials she worked with - including faux stone walls, Plexiglas panels, and black plastic. “The Color Red” stands ambiguously between a wall work and a stage prop. The formica panels lean against the wall in variable arrangements, always with a certain casualness; it is unclear whether they - the embodiment of red - are waiting to assert themselves as an image, or whether they offer themselves as a backdrop for a theatrical event to take place in front of them. The nonchalance with which the elements are arranged preserves their character as found objects. It is not a matter of a “Transfiguration of the Commonplace” so much as it is a matter of effecting everyday life by mobilizing a perception that sees the extraordinary in ordinary things. The ordinary, however, appears extraordinary to this perception not only in terms of the peculiarity or idiosyncrasy of its materiality, but also in terms of its fundamental contingency and fragility. Insofar as such a perception, which remains sensitive to the instability of all that exists, can be called melancholic, it may at times – and perhaps this is its deepest point – touch upon humor.¹ The junkyard - a place where discarded things are collected - seems to be a preferred terrain for a sensibility of this kind.

Bacher also found the material for “The Pink Body” (2017), a series of foam pieces in a large salvage store on the outskirts of Paris. They are fillings for car seats. When she acquired the material, they were a uniformly soft pink. Today, they show the ravages of time. Each of the pieces has aged in a slightly different way, having acquired a unique patina despite the serial nature of their production. Through the process of their slow decay, the physicality of the pink bodies emerges even more clearly. A trace of the irreducibly human appears on them. This effect owes less to the fact that the pink bodies were intended to be used by humans than to the fact that they embody – casually and dryly, in their dysfunctional strangeness – the transience of man-made realities in general. Does anyone else remember a world with cars? Wasn't that *weird*?

– J.R.

	Lutz Bacher “The Color Red”, 2014 formica three pieces, each 48 x 120 inches 122 x 305 cm installation dimensions variable LB/S 2014/08
	Lutz Bacher “The Pink Body”, 2017 foam 27 x 41 x 5.5 in 69 x 104 x 14 cm LB/I 2017/07 - 13



¹ “The melancholic have the best sense of the comic,” from Søren Kierkegaard *Either/Or*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 33.

Isa Genzken

Isa Genzken's "Spiderman" (2008), like many of her sculptural works, brings dried pieces of wood into a constellation with the thing-world of capitalist societies. A delicate panicle has become entangled in streamers hanging from the right and left-hand sides of a Spiderman mask that, itself, hangs from the ceiling. All the elements of the work appear to be past their prime. Spiderman's superhero mask seems to belong to a world of broken things abandoned by humans, as do the tensionless streamers or the used shoes that a teddy bear, haplessly squeezed into a Spiderman costume, tries unsuccessfully to fill. Life seems to have largely drained away from this profoundly melancholic assemblage of things. The products of Western plastic worlds are just as marked by decay as the formations of the plant world. Within the fundamental decay of nature, which also includes the transience of man-made realities, critical melancholia finds a moment of hope: consumer capitalism, as a landscape of ruins, is a thought image that provides a framework for conceiving the fact that what appeared to be self-evident and without alternatives can in fact pass away. Given that it seems easier for many today to "imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism," this is no small feat.¹

On the one hand, Genzken's works present the thing-world of the capitalist empire in a state abandoned of all purpose, testifying to the destruction wrought by capitalist overproduction. On the other hand, however, things that have fallen out of the circulation of use and exchange value are not exposed here as waste; rather, an atmosphere of tenderness surrounds them. In this way, Genzken is camp. The relationship her works establish with things is one in which the logic of dispositive possession is replaced by a sensitivity to decay and damage. The lamp decorated with dysfunctionality ("Untitled," 2006) is touching inasmuch as its functionality is wrested from adverse circumstances. The same is true of the sagging streamers or the stuffed animal tucked into the superhero suit. Nevertheless, Genzken's flamboyant arrangements of things do not convey a feeling of futility to the viewer. In fact, there is nothing despondent about the critically melancholic awareness of finitude. Rather, it develops its own sense for beauty and its own perspective on change. With its sensitivity to the auspicious glamour of the ruinous, Genzken's art is diametrically opposed to the beautiful, ever-new world of consumer capitalism. It is an art that gains its expression from sympathy for the frail, the vulnerable, the ephemeral; in this, too, it keeps open the idea of a world beyond that which exists.

– J.R.

	<p>Isa Genzken Untitled, 2006 lamp, glass, plastic tube, adhesive tape, plastic foil, electric cable 60.25 x 65.75 x 11.75 in 153 x 167 x 30 cm IG/S 2006/26</p>
	<p>Isa Genzken "Spiderman", 2008 paper, dried plant, fabric, stuffed animal, plastic, spray paint, acrylic, shoes, tape 106 x 26.5 x 42.5 in 269 x 67 x 108 cm IG/S 2008/32</p>



¹ This formulation is alternatively attributed to Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson. It is cited prominently by Mark Fisher in *Capitalist Realism* (London: Zero Books, 2009), p. 2.

Anne Imhof

An early work by Anne Imhof (“Mother and Child,” 2002) reminds us that critical melancholia cannot do without its counterpart, the critique of melancholia. In the lineage of Sigmund Freud, melancholia has been criticized as a psychic mechanism that contributes to the naturalization and stabilization of the status quo and the destructive potential within it. Melancholia is here referred to as a process that - by virtue of an introjection of parental authority into the ego - installs social norms within the subject, where, as Freud puts it, in extreme cases they can become a “gathering place for the death-drive.”¹ The internalization of binary gender norms is the primary example of this mechanism. In a critical reading of Freud, Judith Butler has shown that the order of binary gender is based on an early childhood internalization of the same-sex parent lost as an object of love. However, Butler attributes the problem that the internalization of social norms can also install destructive potentials within the subject less to this melancholic mechanism itself than to the fact that this psychic process is socially repressed. In a heteronormatively structured society, the early cathexis of a same-sex love object must be denied, as must its loss: one shall become the person whom one supposedly never desired and therefore never lost.² This double denial of gender melancholy corresponds to a social reality in which queer sexualities are met with homonegative abjection.

Imhof reacts to this social reality with the preferred artistic means of critical melancholia, with allegory. Allegorical art shatters existing contexts of meaning and lays out their fragments as enigmatic images. Imhof cuts up an image of her own daughter with a self-portrait that ambivalently oscillates between self-harm and auto-eroticism, forcing both into an impossible cinematic constellation. This is not a harmless operation. For Walter Benjamin, the allegorist bears the traits of a sadist. He “humiliates” the objects by dislodging them out of their seemingly natural contexts. At the same time, however, this is the only way he succeeds in “satisfying” them: by freeing them from the appearance of immediacy and positioning them as unfamiliar signs, still waiting to be interpreted and thus potentially to be given a different meaning.³ The impulse of critical melancholia is to elicit the perspective of another world from the debris of the existing one. In the case of “Mother and Child,” this impulse is connected to the psychoanalytic critique of (denied) melancholia. For a world in which sexual self-determination, motherhood, and childcare could come together in one (pictorial) space would be a world in which the mechanism of gender melancholy would have lost its destructive potential, because it would no longer have to be denied.

Imhof’s “Bambi” (2001) can also be considered an allegorical work. “Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery,” writes Craig Owens. “The allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them.”⁴ The image of a galloping deer, filmed from a monitor and rendered in slow motion, is freed of its context, interrupting the automatic understanding of the image and thereby revealing the implications of this understanding. Within the framework of capitalism’s relationship to nature, merciless hunting and uninhibited anthropomorphization of the animal (“Bambi”) are two sides of the same coin. Since our perception of the world is more deeply marked by the violence of this relationship to nature than we would like in view of the ecological challenges of our day, the de-automatization of our understanding of animal images is perhaps not the worst way to begin working on its reconfiguration.





	Anne Imhof “Mother and Child”, 2002 video 6:11 min. Edition of 5 + I AP AI/V 2002/01
	Anne Imhof “Bambi”, 2001 video 3:42 min. Edition of 5 + I AP AI/V 2001/01

The new drawings that Imhof made for this exhibition open up yet another horizon of meaning for the concept of melancholia. These drawings link classical symbols of melancholia such as the sea (“Montauk,” 2023) or the swan (“Swan,” 2023) with an underlying mood that makes one think less of the heroic melancholia traditionally associated with the artist than of its much more ordinary and widespread twin: depression. Albrecht Dürer meets

David Foster Wallace. Even the mushroom clouds invoked by these drawings seem more like projections of dark inner worlds than emblems of a real outside world darkening under the sign of atomic destruction. In its withdrawal from the world, depressive melancholia, as Wolf Lepenies has argued, is intimately related to bourgeois society. By drawing losses and conflicts from the world into the self, their real processing remains barred. Therefore, depressive melancholia is also a symptom of a political blockage of options for action. Under the sign of neoliberalism, this problem becomes even more acute. For here, we are dealing with a social formation that generally tends to relegate social conflicts to the ego and thus to make their political dimension unrecognizable. It is no coincidence that depressive personality disorders proliferate in societies that focus one-sidedly on individual autonomy, appealing to the personal responsibility, initiative and creativity of the individual without questioning their social preconditions.⁵ The subject cannot help but break under these excessive demands – unless, and this would be another contemporary variety of depressive melancholia, it maintains the required sovereignty negatively, that is, by preemptively withdrawing from the demanding world. By giving up the world even before it can fail in it, the subject paradoxically preserves for itself, if only negatively, an infinite sovereignty.⁶

Imhof's drawings strongly recall this very contemporary discourse on melancholia, a discourse in which (depressive) melancholia reappears as an object of critique: it addresses depression as a collective and thus objective social problem. To cope with this problem, it is indeed less advisable to trust in God (“No god we trust”, 2023) than to sharpen a critical, decidedly secular and world-oriented melancholia against depression. Imhof's drawings, at any rate, can also be seen as instruments for such a turn: the world of her figures tends to dissolve. A play of lines.

– J.R.

		<p>Anne Imhof “No god we trust”, 2023 pencil on paper 12.25 x 16.1 in 31 x 41 cm AI/P 2023/08</p>
		<p>Anne Imhof “Montauk”, 2023 pencil on paper 12.25 x 16.1 in 31 x 41 cm AI/P 2023/11</p>
		<p>Anne Imhof “Swan”, 2023 pencil on paper 8.25 x 5.8 in 21 x 14.8 cm AI/P 2023/09</p>
		<p>Anne Imhof “Self portrait”, 2023 pencil on paper 12.25 x 16.1 in 31 x 41 cm AI/P 2023/07</p>

¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, translated by Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press: 1926), p. 79.

² Judith Butler, “Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification”, in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 132-166.

³ Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 2019), p. 197.

⁴ Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism (Part 1 and 2)", in: *Beyond Recognition. Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1992), pp. 52-97, here p. 54.

⁵ Alain Ehrenberg, *Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing Depression in the Contemporary Age*, translated by Enrico Caouette, Jacob Homel, David Homel, and Don Winkler, under the direction of David Homel (Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016).

⁶ For this type of depression see Friedrich Wolfram Heubach, "Die Melancholie einerseits und andererseits die Depression. Eine Argumentation zum Verhältnis zwischen Melancholie und Depression und ein polemisches Porträt des Depressiven als inverser Triumphator" in *Ein Bild und sein Schatten. Zwei randständige Bemerkungen zum Bild der Melancholie und zur Erscheinung der Depression* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1997), pp. 129-168; Slavoj Žižek, "Melancholy and the Act," in *Critical Inquiry* 26:4 (2000), pp. 657-681.

Michael Krebber

In the paintings “MK/M 2014/14” and “MK/M 2014/09” (both 2014), Michael Krebber uses black spray-paint to catch the fleeting optimism of streamers on canvas. Sometimes, the black paint soberly registers their hanging forms, sometimes it creates a spiral itself that seems to loosely wrap around the contour of a worn-out paper streamer. The painterly depiction of a streamer, however, only foregrounds the worn-out condition of the real specimen which is indexically captured on the same pictorial surface. Yet these are not some kind of X-ray images of exhausted pleasure. Painting here does not rise above its subject matter. The silly, childlike world of colorful streamers is neither met with adult seriousness in black and white, nor with the superiority of irony. Rather, the radiance of these images derives from a melancholia that cannot simply be pitted undialectically against ridiculousness. Like the melancholic sense for the aura of the ephemeral, the receptivity for the ridiculous counters the self-righteous sovereignty of ideal beauty. To enjoy ridiculousness is to enjoy the decline of sovereignty. Like critical melancholia, it stands in solidarity with that which does not conform to this ideal.

A decidedly anti-sovereign mission connects Michael Krebber’s painterly project with Jack Smith’s camp aesthetic. A work from 2007 (“Untitled”) translates a motif from Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* into a painting. It consists of an extremely lush bouquet of flowers in an oversized vase. In the film, this reoccurring motif appears in blinding white. The extreme light and dark contrast is a result of the outdated filmstock Smith used to shoot *Flaming Creatures*. Like the grainy quality of the overall image, this effect points to the ephemeral quality of the celluloid itself. Michael Krebber remains faithful to Smith’s *Camp Materialism* by isolating the melancholic medium specificity of his cinematic image. Through Krebber’s painterly abstraction it becomes the emblem of another anti-sovereign (art history of) modernism.

– J.R.

	<p>Michael Krebber “MK/M 2014/09”, 2014 spray paint on canvas 63 x 47.25 in 160 x 120 cm MK/M 2014/09</p>
	<p>Michael Krebber “MK/M 2014/14”, 2014 spray paint on canvas 47.25 x 63 in 120 x 160 cm MK/M 2014/14</p>
	<p>Michael Krebber Untitled, 2007 acrylic on canvas 33.5 x 41.25 in 85 x 105 cm MK/M 2007/08</p>



Henrik Olesen

Crocodiles count as living fossils. Their remarkable evolutionary history dates back some 200 million years. The slight dizziness that accompanies an attempt to think back this far in natural history has taken on a new quality today. This is because the modern notion of nature being able to provide a reliable backdrop for the events of human history, with its slow geological and evolutionary changes and recurring cycles, has reached a point of crisis. As the historian Dipesh Chakabarty notes,¹ the foreground-background relationship between human history and natural history is breaking down under the sign of the Anthropocene: humans have become a geologically determining force whose impact has disrupted the balance of ecosystemic correlations that have long provided relatively stable environmental conditions. What was previously perceived only as background has forced itself catastrophically into the foreground of historical events, provoking the ground-shaking realization that the unleashed dynamics of human-influenced natural history could end the history of humanity itself. To pursue this notion is to confront the dizzying thought that not only was there a deep time before the emergence of anything like historical consciousness, but that there might be another one after.

Crocodiles are a suitable cultural projection screen for the imagination of a world without humans on account of their literally improbable perseverance. Present on the earth for many millions of years before humans, they seem to float undisturbed beneath the surface of the swamp, apparently untouched, observing a development whereby humans could disappear from the surface of the planet. However, such a notion fails to recognize the fact that the crocodile, although it survived the fifth mass extinction and thus outlived the dinosaurs, this time, with the sixth, is endangering itself. Moreover, this idea of the extinction-resistant crocodile is all too readily linked to the familiar image of a latently threatening nature that is alien to human culture.

As if to counter this dichotomy, Henrik Olesen makes crocodiles appear as art. He recreates them with the help of wood, wire, fabric, and plaster and places them on white pedestals, whose crudeness gives them the appearance of models for art-specific exhibition architecture. The crocodile, with its rough and emphatically artificial form, serves as a metaphor for the contemporary intertwining of natural and human history. The color does the rest: the green of Olesen's crocodiles looks like a toxic combination of swamp-water and chemicals. Olesen's three-dimensional thought-images [*Denkbilder*] might be described as melancholic in the sense that Theodor W. Adorno understood the term in "The Idea of Natural History"² – as a critical position that forbids any "back to nature" attitude. The demand for a return to nature would only re-cement the separation of nature and culture, which in the age of the Anthropocene must be identified not as an attempt at a solution, but rather as a decisive part of the problem. In fact, the ecological devastation, whose historical scale is reported in the news almost daily, testifies to the fact that, within the framework of the Western-capitalist narratives of progress, "nature" has been primarily understood as something to be used without feeling obliged to pay the price: the work of women and slaves, as well as raw materials, energy, and food.³

The melancholia that Adorno defended insists instead on the embeddedness of all human history in natural history. More than pointing out the fundamental dependence of human existence on environmental conditions, he concerned himself with the impulse to situate the perspective of natural history within the thinking of historical, i.e. man-made realities. For historical worlds – even and especially those whose establishment appears to people as self-evident, as unalterable quasi-nature – are themselves subject to natural history, and thus essentially transient. Within the framework of Adorno's critical melancholia this becomes the occasion for a thought-experiment: the present is anticipated as a landscape of ruins in order to create mental space for the possibility of another reality. At a time when man-made reality pushes a natural-historical end of human history onto the horizon of possibility, this thought experiment is by no means superfluous. On the contrary, it acquires an enormous urgency precisely in its thrust aiming at the social establishment of historical worlds. In this perspective, imagining the world of Western modernity, built on the extractive domination of nature, as a landscape of ruins contains a moment of hope, not least for the future of human life on this planet: the end of the world not as apocalypse, but as the beginning of another, better world. Such a melancholia would likely not be primed in black, but rather in poisonous green.

	<p>Henrik Olesen “Crocodile”, 2023 plaster, acrylic, clear varnish, fabric, wire, wood 13.75 x 78.75 x 23.5 in 35 x 200 x 60 cm base: 2.5 x 48 x 96.5 in 6 x 122 x 245 cm HO/S 2023/11</p>
	<p>Henrik Olesen “Crocodile”, 2023 plaster, acrylic, clear varnish, fabric, wire, wood 13.75 x 84.5 x 39.5 in 35 x 215 x 100 cm base: 2.5 x 48 x 96.5 in 6 x 122 x 245 cm HO/S 2023/12</p>

¹ Vgl. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2021) p. 31.

² Theodor W. Adorno, “The Idea of Natural-History,” trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor, in *Telos* 60 (Summer 1984), pp. 111-124.

³ On the concept of nature as “cheap nature” see Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).

Josephine Pryde



There is a prose text by the poet Lisa Robertson in which she reflects on the relationship between melancholia and perspective. For her, melancholia is not synonymous with an inwardness turned away from the world; rather, she conceives of melancholia as a form of inventive doubt. This doubt is inventive because it introduces complications into one's relationship to the world; in this way, melancholic doubt is, for Robertson, also erotic. Robertson's melancholia does not separate from the world, but connects with it in a new, erotic fashion. By shattering the trusted forms of the world's appearance, melancholia makes way for the experience of "frictive change."ⁱ

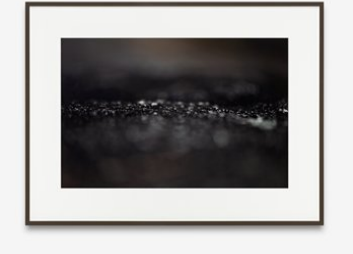
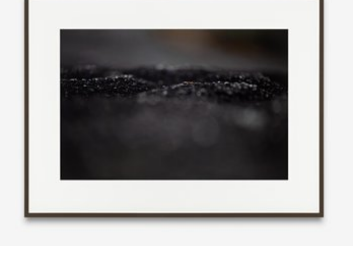
At perhaps the deepest level of representation, such an experience effects our perception of space. Whereas the system of perspectival representation demands a unitary subject, a static eye upon which the spatial construction is directed, melancholic space is inconsistent. It has no even extension: "In melancholia," Robertson writes, "extension stutters, braids, lurches, fucks, shuns, strokes and snags in contingency."ⁱⁱ The spatial organization of the gaze is replaced or displaced by the "risk of [the] experiment"ⁱⁱⁱ. The melancholic eye expects that which troubles it. Melancholia therefore awaits the challenge by that which cognizance does not already master. Insofar as the melancholia of a withdrawal associated with the attitude of doubt can be described as a form of latency, Robertson emphasizes that this state should not be misunderstood as passive: it makes room for experiments with the non-identical.^{iv}

Josephine Pryde is perhaps a melancholic in precisely this – Robertsonian – sense. From the outset, her work – represented in this exhibition by two early and two recent pieces – has experimented with subverting homogeneous space in favor of an eroticism of seeing that passionately entangles itself in contingency. The early works, "Seep" and "You & Me" (both 2001) take pleasure destroying our habits of spatial seeing. The convention of homogeneous space splinters alongside the norm of the couple-relationship (in its commodified form), which is alluded to at the level of content. Between the splinters of space, the normative orders of the world seep away. Albeit "only" as an experiment, for the moment.

The more recent works "Ring Lip I" and "Ring Lip II" (2020) present something like the dark scars of melancholic space itself. In them, "frictive experience" starts to take effect; they offer resistance to spatially oriented vision. The close-ups of cup and ring marks carved into rock – prehistoric petroglyphs found primarily in the British Isles and in places on the Atlantic coast like Galicia – appear not as documentation of something given, but as manifestations of visual frictions. These frictions shatter the order of spatial seeing, along with the compulsion to fix the relationship between nature and culture – in order to experimentally open up a space, if only for a moment, that eludes the conceptual mechanics of this quintessentially modern dichotomy.

– J.R.

	Josephine Pryde "You & Me", 2001 chromogenic print 11 x 14.75 in 27.8 x 37.5 cm framed: 13.6 x 17.5 x 1.1 in 34.5 x 44.5 x 2.9 cm) Edition 1 + I AP JPRY/F 2001/01_01
	Josephine Pryde "Seep", 2001 chromogenic print 11 x 14.75 in 27.8 x 37.5 cm framed: 13.6 x 17.5 x 1.1 in 34.5 x 44.5 x 2.9 cm) Edition 1 + I AP JPRY/F 2001/02_01

	<p>Josephine Pryde “Ring Lip I”, 2020 archival pigment print 19.8 x 29.75 in 50.33 x 75.5 cm framed: 29 x 38.75 1.5 in 73.5 x 98.5 x 3.9 cm Edition of 3 + II AP JPRY/F 2020/01_01</p>
	<p>Josephine Pryde “Ring Lip II”, 2020 archival pigment print 19.8 x 29.75 in 50.33 x 75.5 cm framed: 29 x 38.75 1.5 in 73.5 x 98.5 x 3.9 cm Edition of 3 + II AP JPRY/F 2020/02_01</p>

ⁱ Lisa Robertson, “Perspectors/Melancholia,” in *Nilling. Prose Essays on Noise, Pornography, The Codex, Melancholy, Lucretius, Folds, Cities, and Related Aporias*, (Toronto, ON: Book*hug Press, 2020), pp. 47-54, here p. 49.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 52.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Cf. *ibid.*, p. 51.