

Political / Non-Political

Artists: **Ei Arakawa-Nash, Will Benedict, Joseph Beuys, Rafał Bujnowski, Renée Green, Rachel Harrison, Jenny Holzer, Kris Lemsalu, Marcin Maciejowski, Gerhard Richter, Wilhelm Sasnal, Anne Speier, Lucie Stahl, Wolfgang Tillmans, Franz West, Sue Williams, Amelie von Wulffen, Heimo Zobernig**

"You can try to think your way out of this world, you can try to be apolitical. But you can also think your way into the world—guided by the intention to discern and to understand. Public space then also becomes a space for thought. A space where private and public faces and places are mutually dependent. What is wiser and nicer is better determined by the poet than the scientist." (Hans Jonas)¹

The exhibition emphasizes art's potential to stimulate social awareness and change. It addresses the ways in which art is able or aims to influence society and whether artistic creation implies political action. Not everything artistic is political per se. Like art, the political is not an a priori certainty, but rather the product of a construct informed by societal interests. "The construction of the political" thus serves more as orientation. At issue are the very different ways in which political aspirations are manifested. Considerations of "political correctness" are staples of today's critical jargon, while the "political" has enjoyed a boom of sorts in exhibitions in recent years. Yet, more than ever, it raises questions regarding the interests that link art and politics, or—on the other hand—that cut all links to politics, which once constituted the appeal and special nature of such production.

Joseph Beuys, whose work was made to serve as evidence of political art in at least four Documenta exhibitions, took part in a discussion event in Essen in 1972. When a member of the audience angrily shouted, "You talk about everything, God and the world, just not about art," Beuys replied: "But God and the world is art!" His multiple *Sulphur-Covered Zinc Box (Plugged Corner)*, on view in the exhibition, consists of two open zinc boxes. One of the boxes, a small triangular piece of gauze in the lower left corner, is covered with yellow sulfur. For Beuys, these boxes are metaphors for the human head, symbolizing the processes that take place within by means of the objects and materials used. The soft, malleable fabric in the bottom left-hand corner forms a counterweight to the strict geometric form of the box. The corner, Beuys explained, symbolizes the most mechanistic tendency of the human mind, which is also expressed in square rooms, square houses and square cities. In a broader sense, it stands for the rigid coordinate system of our culture, science, and lifestyles. Beuys imbued his zinc boxes with a combination of rational and intuitive qualities, turning them into a political statement promoting an human ideal able to overcome the limitations of the materialistic mindset in favor of idealistic experiences. The idea that the author has disappeared, i.e. that they are not the center point, the arbiter, or the target of the work they have created, as propagated by post-structuralist and deconstructivist theorists, has a liberating effect on recipients and producers alike. It can be explained by the interpreters' conscious decision to take the anti-individualistic thrust of these forms of work seriously.

Gerhard Richter formalizes this separation between the images and their historical and political context. A notable product of this approach is his RAF series. Richter's preoccupation with the RAF reminds us—admittedly in a highly coded form—that there is a private subtext underlying the publicly accessible aspects of the RAF series, a subtext that outsiders can perhaps guess at, but never really grasp.

For Richter, nature is foreign to man and—even where it appears beautiful at first glance—is never man's friend. He based the painting *Swiss Alps* (1969) on photographs he had taken from an airplane on a trip to Milan in 1968. He reduced the mountain range to its most striking outlines and surfaces. A deep skepticism towards the image characterizes Richter's work; from the very beginning he questioned which images we can still make, which ones we need, and how truthful they are. In the paintings—prospects and

excerpts of seashores, mountains and valleys, meadows, forests, icebergs, stars, cloud formations and cityscapes—nature seems to lie behind a glass, accessible to the painter only through color. Richter often blurs his images, paints over them, applied layer upon layer of color only to tear them open again. An endless trying and failing to capture an image of the world that helps us to understand it better. In art, there is often a preference to conceal rather than address political involvement, carefully obscuring the private motivations and political ideas underlying the artworks and rendering them unrecognizable to the recipient. This covering of tracks probably owes as much to personal needs as to artistic convictions: discomfort over making one's own position central to the interpretation of the work, perhaps also the inability to articulate it in any other way than in mediated form, but also, of course, the insights of reception aesthetics (and discursive strategy), according to which the vagueness of content and references increases the diversity of interpretations.

When it comes to transforming political capital into artistic capital, **Wolfgang Tillmans** plays with camouflage and distinctions. In his draperies and seemingly randomly found still lifes, he celebrates the principle of attributability to various contexts (art, fashion, politics), which is an important feature of his work. Dispensing with suggestions of personality, narrative, and milieu, he transforms the anecdotal moment into a formal one without losing the sexual and often gay connotations associated with the presentation of the material. In consequence, the drapery remains interesting to different groups of recipients both within and outside the art context.

This text singles out the artistic positions of Joseph Beuys, Gerhard Richter and Wolfgang Tillmans, among other things because a great many commentaries have already examined their work in regard to the political as a theme. The exhibition allows for an open-ended exploration of work by a further 15 artists, with the Polish artists **Rafał Bujnowski**, **Marcin Marciejowski**, and **Wilhelm Sasnal** occupying a special position with regard to the explicitness of their political allusions. The collective work of **Grupa Ładnie**, which stylistically references the realism of Gerhard Richter, tellingly coincides with the brief political spring at the turn of the millennium between communism and liberal democracy in Poland, and functions as a kind of thermometer indicating the degree of political permissiveness under which art can take place.

In this context, however, it is perhaps important to remember Jutta Koether's comment on how artists actually approach their work: "What scares me about his [Gerhard Richter's] activities, the heads or the photos, is that all of this can happen when you completely immerse yourself in painting. For me, it's the painterly problems that Richter brings up and simply puts back down, not always and with everything, but there are moments that no one else can manage. (...) When you deal with pictures, that's what counts. Of course, you're lying to yourself at the same time. I can stand in front of it and take it in, but on the other hand I know how it came about. Everything else all around is awful, horrible, it shouldn't be like that. But there's no other way than to somehow take it apart for the moment. And of course that also bothers me about Buchloh [Benjamin Buchloh, theorist and Gerhard Richter apologist], that he constantly attaches the wrong things to the pictures."²⁾

1) Ursula Lutz in: *Hannah Arendt*, TEXT+KRITIK, No. 166/167, 2005, p. 16

2) Jutta Koether in: *Richterrunde*, TEXTE ZUR KUNST, Issue no. 13, 1994, p. 140

Opening: 14 November, 7 pm

Exhibition duration: 15 November – 21 December 2024