



Mailing, Details: no title 180x150cm, c-print, 2009,
letter, catalogue

[...]

She wanted to ask her one last time. Having just won an art prize, the exhibition had provided her with new interest and the opportunity to publish an edition of her paper works with an accompanying portfolio. She had been advised to get a text written for it. Ideally this would be written by someone in a position to theorise her work in a logical and stylistically coherent way: an author, an art historian or perhaps her old art professor. But wasn't he busy with other things, and did he even know what her current concerns were? She decided not only to ask her, but to send her some images – photocopies of her photographs, and a catalogue too, that documented the key terms in *her* work. 'Serial', 'analogue', 'staging', 'photographed', 'spatiality', 'interlaced images', 'three-dimensionality on one level' all stood on the first page of the catalogue, bound with plywood, with the characters presented vertically, making it difficult to grasp their semantics. They seemed more like draped pearl necklaces, the black letters dancing on the white paper, pushing the two dimensionality of the paper surface into space. What followed was a cross section of her photographs from the last three years with precise details about the dimensions, medium, year of production, and, equally precisely selected, the titles, with an apparently ill-defined 'Untitled' and followed by the accompanying description in brackets: '(corners 1-4)', '(circles 1-2)', '(studio 1-8)'...

Von: [REDACTED]
Betreff: Re: adresse
Datum: 22. Juni 2011 10:26:26 MESZ
An: [REDACTED]

Liebe [REDACTED],
komme gerade zurück von einer Gruppenausstellung in Kopenhagen und die Post ist auf dem Weg zu dir (ich wusste gar nicht, dass du in [REDACTED]astprofessorin bist!).
In drei Wochen habe ich [REDACTED] schicke dir dann die Einladung dazu.
Ich hoffe der Brief ist nicht blöd, anmaßend oder sonstiges.
Alle Liebe,

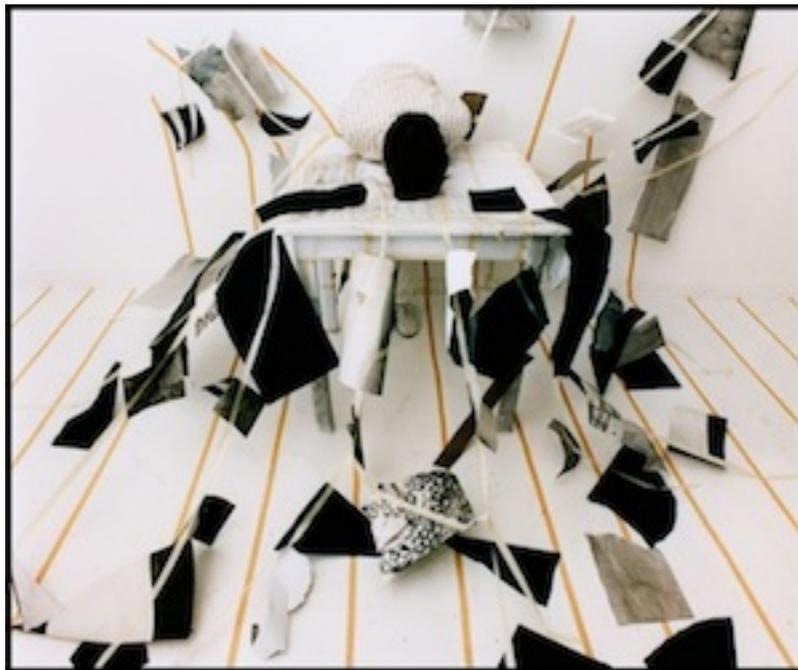
E-Mail 22.06.2011, 10:26:29 MESZ

She photographs analogue and serial, staged spaces whose three-dimensionality she brings onto one image plane, the art historian would think later, when looking through the catalogue. But she was still missing the postal address; she asked by email where to send her the material. In addition, *she* said that she hoped the package wouldn't be stupid, presumptuous or anything. Did it sound too grovelling? Or just disarmingly honest? Yes, she'd like that. She likes honesty, straightforwardness and self-reflexive doubt.

*

She smiled at the email. Was it a mistake to clearly formulate one's fears, and to address them to the one person who could quash them? They liked each other, had worked together often and had spent many hours together in the studio talking about her work. Could there be more intensive moments? Happier? At this point in time, the direction these events would take was not foreseeable.

Too daft? Certainly not. But there was one problem. Having functionalised her language for art theory, having practiced the systematisations of art history and later of art theory for nearly twenty years – albeit with scepticism- how should she find a language for a body of work that eluded these systematisations? In her advanced research she had developed her own systems, and, with the canon in



no title (2), 60x70cm, c-print, 2010

mind, attempted to break, overhaul, and extend these systems.

The work presented her with new challenges. Her language, tailored for activist and intervention art, for art systematic and constructivist aspects, was not suitable for this. None of the theories she had produced to date appeared to be compatible with the works, and she was afraid of producing an 'arts section' feature, or a theoretical text which could destroy any art under the weight of its theoretical construct. Of course, she could have written one thing about it, that the work was beyond well-defined genres: were they two-dimensional images, abstract painting or technically produced photographs? Or perhaps three-dimensional objects, or woven together with curatorial, contextual and site-specific incorporated forms of presentation? Were they documentary photographs of installation-like staged bodies, or of staged installations of bodies? Or the performing of space? The canonical distinctions between the genres seemed to be inadequate and it came together in one sole dimension, that of the image. The indeterminacy of the genres (the theorist would speak of intermedialities) clearly present in the motif. Were they abstract parodies of body, gender, surface, space and time?

Or deconstructions of dualities such as living and lifeless, foreground and background, presence and absence, and constructs such as visibility and invisibility and materiality and immateriality? Or were they still lifes or portraits? And if portraits, of whom or what?

Or should she write about Derrida's idea of the 'différance', that the work so strongly suggested to her? She thought about the inconclusiveness of the term, the particular space between the act of speech and writing and through the 'a' switched with an 'e', the opposing order between the sensual and the intelligible, the polysemy of the underlying verb 'différer', the double-meaning of the temporalization in terms of postponement, and spatialization in terms of being different. Should precisely this process of postponement become visible in her works, or even be applied, that post-1968 philosophical concept from the time of Derrida's lecture to the Société Française de Philosophie which accompanied, inspired, annoyed, confused and even lost generations of academics? Taken literally, this process can only be hinted at, as in its inconclusiveness, it can be neither visible nor invisible – it dissolves the 'is' into one (is). She could have told an art historical story, citing references from the fifties, sixties and seventies



n.t, b&w-print on pedestal, 45x127x108cm, 2011,
shown between floor and wall

She could start with action painting and its 'all over' principle of a Jackson Pollock; from the multimedia happenings with dance, music, readings, sound, image projections and painting, conceived and brought onto the scene by Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenberg and Tudor, from the avant-garde monochrome paintings, usually in white or black. She could talk about the minimal art of Robert Morris in the material, or Donald Judd in the form, in which the 'primary structures' distinctly, boldly and serially repeat themselves. She could, possibly mistakenly, discuss feminist experiments with the body such as those of Yoko Ono, who used black and white photography as a stylistic medium to highlight the documentary quality of the work; or conceptual art and its empty forms, such as Robert Barry, who explored the relationship between space and surface.

*

She had hoped to see her at the opening of her last exhibition, to assure her that she didn't want to put her under any pressure. And the challenges that she spoke of in her last email shouldn't mean that the relationship is put under any strain. But hadn't she, during their meetings between just the two of them (or three – the work demanded attention and it was the starting point of all their common avenues of thought) already proven that she was the right person to theorise her work?

She thought of her criticism of the triangular floor piece, or more explicitly the slant of the MDF boards that suggested a flush installation on the wall, but did not follow through. And now she was showing 'Untitled' (circles 1-2), with two C-prints on a pedestal 1.5m high, as a two-sided work. The folding parts of altars from the middle ages were often painted on both sides, in order to be able to present the events of the old testament chronologically. Earlier, during the creative process, she had tried to invoke the element of time with light processes and partial concealing.

And hadn't she, the theorist, once related her own curatorial practice to her artistic work? For some time now she had sent out invitations to guided tours of exhibitions she had curated once a month, showing films, installations, videos, photographs, slide talks and performances. The exhibitions were held in a place which did not immediately present itself as a suitable site for art, but which could function as a kind of parenthesis, creating a space where form and content could correspond, and where similar and the same could be juxtaposed. Wasn't this about the process of creating form for her, the creation and designing of body and space with performative means, without applying art historical delineations?



excerpt: o.T., (maximal partition 1-8), 8 b&w-prints, 17x21cm, 2011

Can photography not be painting as well? Can painting be graphics? And performance be sculpture? And objects be furniture? And curating be art? And wasn't everything tied up with Johanna herself? At times *she* appeared as an agent, a graphic element or an indicator of scale, and although *she* need not appear everywhere and was not always visible (and had recently tended to appear less), *she* had always been there as a point of reference. The calibration and dislocation of the world is always dependent on the observer, at least that was what had always been said in her seminars that she had attended over the years.

*

Would it be possible to deal with her work through text? An interview? A photographic story? A letter explaining why she turned the request down? 'Letter to Johanna' perhaps? She felt she had something to contribute to the work of this talented young woman who employed her body and technical equipment to produce an offer of form between the positions, perspectives and genders, in which she abstracted the whole universe, and compressed it down into one image. Should she perhaps respond to the particularities of the camera, whose mechanism was better illustrated in these images than she had seen in any other work? Or to *her* colourless colour



o.T. (ca. 600 x DinA4), c-print, 108x129cm, 2011

photographs, that one could mistake for black and white? At times these would take on a yellowish or blueish tint through *her* work in the darkroom, and with *her* use of a flash, the lighter motifs would produce milky results, and the black and white contrasts would become graphically accentuated. Or should she oppose the black and white photographs that she explicitly employed for coloured motifs, to remove all colour, to further abstract, to homogenise and articulate them on a two dimensional level? Although the whole creative process was controlled, and she was a considered participant and observer from the beginning to the end, it ran according to indefinable unpredictables, whose exact moment of appearance was not determinable (was it with the camera, the dark room work or the point of perception in the eyes of the viewer?). Why did she even like the works, and wasn't this a criteria which she had rejected for years, because she feared it could discredit the theoretical background?

After a long, long time considering it, she decided not to turn *her* down, and not to advise against publishing a printed catalogue with an art theoretical text. Although this format may not serve her work well: the large dimensions, the hanging, the framing or not, the positioning in the space and juxtaposition would be lost – the materiality demanded its rights. She would ask for her patience, for patience with herself, and for trust.

She would draft her text over the next six weeks, that was her plan anyway.

[...]

Excerpt from chapter two of 'Letter to Johanna', from the unpublished novel 'Death of an art historian', 2011, by Birte Kleine-Benne ©

Translation: Oliver Walker



[2011 Letter...a.pdf \(1,1 MB\)](#)

Auszug aus Kapitel II „Letter to Johanna“,
aus dem unveröffentlichten Roman „Tod einer Kunsthistorikerin“,
2011, von Birte Kleine-Benne ©