

Aura transfer

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Grief work

The work by Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock is specially for the exhibition "Writing Images Thinking. Walter Benjamin and contemporary art" was created and opens a striking and encrypted tour, which includes the works of 56 artists - around a third of them commissioned for this occasion. It is a stimulating course through a world of reflections, reflections, gaps and mental images like those of Mark Lammert ("Risse I-IV", 2003-04), who translated Benjamin's texts into Berlin school notebooks using meticulous writing and tiny letters. They are barely readable and look like the negative of the actual image. It arises where the writing creates blank spaces that it circles in thought: an ironic self-assertion of a world of images that, according to Benjamin, we may like "out of a dark defiance of knowledge".

MARTOS GALLERY

Using a thematic structure and an associative approach, the show examines the influence of the Jewish philosopher on the artists' work, from the rediscovery of Benjamin's writings in the 1960s to the appropriation of his ideas in the present. Represented include names such as Anselm Kiefer, Christian Boltanski, Marcel Duchamp, Sylvie Fleury, Jeff Wall and Via Lewandowsky. Two strategies can be recognized in the way art shows itself to be connected to its early theorist: In the one, it sticks closely to the creation of legends around the person of Benjamin, to his life, which was followed by the persecution by the National Socialists and the suicide in Port Bou cast a shadow after a failed escape in 1940.

Few of the works develop a pull like Dani Karavan's sketches "Passages Port Bou" (1993/2004). They were created in the context of the Israeli artist's Benjamin monument and repeatedly scan the dunes by the sea in hard, moving graphite lines, as if they had to do all the mourning work. In contrast, the glossy views of the American Aura Rosenberg in her motivic quotations from Benjamin's "Berlin Childhood in the Nineteenth Century" - for example in shots of the famous imperial panorama or chocolates in colorful tin foil - do not go beyond the significance of a devotional item. Candida Höfer's photographs from the Paris National Library (1998) overcome the mere location of this pivotal point in Benjamin's exile and search for the memory of history in the patterns of systematic archiving.

Art as a medium of reflection

On a dialectical level, the second group of works approaches a Benjaminian hodgepodge of themes and concepts. The focus of attention is naturally the writing on the question of the reproducibility of the work of art. Timm Ulrich's "Walter Benjamin: The work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility. "The Photocopy of the Photocopy of the Photocopy" (1967) represents a melancholic self-experiment of copy art. The fading copies of Benjamin's book title cover the walls of an entire room and, in the gradual disappearance of the signifier, make the precarious attempt to create memory visible.

MARTOS GALLERY

The matter-of-factness with which this show allows the images, installations, and video films to speak, its consistent avoidance of texts with the exception of brief explanations, may be irritating at first, but it follows Benjamin's call to break down the barrier between writing and images and to use art as a medium of reflection. Space is created for the fetishism towards things, the passion for collecting, the phenomenology of the everyday. Anyone who gets involved will be rewarded with a sensual experience that makes clear the aura that surrounds Walter Benjamin, whose name itself stands for the destruction of the concept. The room installation "Auratransfer - Everyone has his Benjamin" (2004) by Volker März draws the opposite conclusion in an ambivalent attitude of reverence and ironic distance: März has created a collection of Benjamin cartoon figures made of clay that show the greatness of spirit in all possible situations which seem so stereotypical, as if they were manufactured industrially: art as a commodity. The aura is primarily not a phenomenon of art, but rather one of perception.

Claudia Schwartz

Exhibition until January 30th. Accompanying book: Detlev Schöttker, Barbara Straka (ed.): Writing Images Thinking. Walter Benjamin and contemporary art. With further essays on, among other things, Benjamin's reception in film and architecture. Suhrkamp-Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2004. Around 120 illustrations, 263 pages, Euro 39.-.