

## Sies + Höke Galerie

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### Press release

#### Peppi Bottrop: How long is forgotten?

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One of contemporary culture's greatest absurdities is its aspiration to make experience analyzable, calculable, and conservable. One of painting's greatest promises is to vehemently oppose such presumptuousness. Against this backdrop, Peppi Bottrop's first solo exhibition at Sies + Höke shouldn't just be read as a pleasantly poetic twist, but also as a subversion of the conventional logic of time. *How Long Is Forgotten?* The entanglement of simple past and past participle produces a glitch that turns this inconspicuous question into a grammatical time warp; the message between the lines (and the times) is that past and present, forgetting and remembering, origin and utopia—in Bottrop's images and in general—unfold according to their own incalculable dynamics.

Forgetting and remembering fundamentally oppose each other as antagonistic forces. Remembering is the maintenance, cultivation, and conservation of the past and identity. Forgetting, by contrast, creates the capacity for something new in a neurological sense. Remembering builds on continuity, forgetting causes a rupture. At the same time, the awareness that remembrances of our time perception can radically throw us out of step has been part of cultural memory since the publication of Marcel Proust's novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* at the very latest. In order to verbally approximate the phenomenon of *mémoires involontaires*—memories that unexpectedly suspend temporal continuity—Proust formulated sentences that syntactically sprawl forth, branching off into nested moments. In Peppi Bottrop's work, it's the synaptic strokes that sprawl, entangled forms and structures. His *mémoires involontaires* are informed by the peripheries of the cities he's recently lived and worked in—Düsseldorf, Los Angeles, Mexico City—but especially by the Ruhrgebiet's rough industrial districts he grew up in.

For those familiar with the coal-mining region's frayed infrastructure, the biographical traces in this young painter's works will be obvious far beyond his use of the brittle, black material; for them, his psycho-geographic approach is not only understandable, but unmistakable. Cornelius Tittel recently described Bottrop's work as "as the manic cartography of an urban flaneur... deep in the West where the sun is veiled in dust." Following from the behaviorist explanation of memory in terms of processing cognitive maps, one might add that the artist's meandering strokes at times seem like the offshoots of the unmappable paths memories can take. Much like Guy Debord and his drifting entourage, Peppi Bottrop isn't so interested in a functional urbanism as he is in its mistakes and makeshift solutions; in places shaped by reality without any concern for design principles, or others where people have just messed things up again. When looking at his "manic cartographies," one can discern a resemblance to the fulminant formulations of J.G. Ballard, who psycho-pathologically dissected his native city of London like a corpse. In contrast to the peaceful flaneur, his paintings are never a stroll or a joyride, but always a tour de force.

Here, tour de force means an act of violence without a speed limit, but with abrupt stops and detours—the *détournements* all great flaneurs are known for. But one also connected with toil and effort, driven by the kind of restlessness and *weltschmerz* that makes good painting possible in the first place. The formal ambivalence of Bottrop's gestural abstractions is mystifying and makes it difficult to diagnose its ductus or sound (which are fundamentally the same). Each cartography, every manically sketched district is made of gutturally croaking coal marks, which may seem fractal, filigreed, and hesitant at times, while rigorous, resolute, and rapid at others. Not least, the artist's stroke stops anyone trying to pin him down conceptually dead in their tracks.

In contrast to the obsessively overdrawn, self-revising forms of the earlier works, some of the recent compositions appear like a rhizomatic web of frayed signs and exploded geometries. Everything that seemed at least halfway rational before has overgrown, mutated, metastasized; there are strokes that seem searching, and curves that suddenly break off or peter out as though they took a wrong turn. One could see the worn down supply routes, pipelines, and left over cables from decommissioned mines in these post-industrial arabesques. Then again, there's a lot more to them than coughed up memorabilia.

Simultaneously self-assured and broken from within, the artist's stroke testifies to the inexhaustible stop and go of a painting process that at times feels as faltering, sluggish, and nudging as the traffic in Bottrop-Kirchhellen. Peppi Bottrop's dialogue with the image at times becomes an argument, or often enough a physical battle. The energy released by the conflict in his gestural abstractions isn't only palpable, but constitutive. Occasionally, it feels as if a whiplash has churned the visual elements about, deranging and dislocating them. Much like a rhizome or the metropolitan Rhine-Ruhr region, Bottrop's images lack any real center—depending on your perspective it can be nowhere everywhere at once.

Some works in the exhibition have the paradoxical attraction of an uncovered crash site. Aren't there skid marks, the grill of a lorry's ramp, the metal remains of a sports car's body? Isn't there the echo of frantic speed, red trickling into the ground, *Soil of Reddish Hue*?<sup>1</sup> The existential, the drama, *Sorh*?<sup>2</sup> Couldn't *How Long Is Forgotten* be the question of a relative or loved one, asking in broken English how long the amnesia after the accident is likely to last? What really happened? The one responsible gave his fragmentary testimony: a dog bite, his right hand out of order. To give the bare canvas its first structure, he put it on a sheet of metal grating; the resulting impression was fixed with a rust converter, and he continued working on it once his hand was better—with graphite sticks, coal, acrylics.

The reddish grid structures that pervade the exhibition seem like the leftovers of a long obsolete order, or a further reminiscence of the German rust belt. But it's even more noteworthy how they form the image ground while simultaneously subverting it. Here, Peppi Bottrop integrated chance elements into his paintings for the first time, and it seems as though he's referencing a present whose fears often manifest in high fences and police barricades; whose reality is more determined by data highways than life on the street. Even though Peppi Bottrop's paintings are marked by the decline of the mining industry and its relics, it would be hard to deny their contemporary relevance. If one thinks of them like a rearview mirror: one sees not only what we've left behind as a society, but also what might soon overtake us.

According to Walter Benjamin, the essential aspects of a present can only be understood through their interplay with their unfinished past—and only intermittently, in a certain moment or the concretion of an image. All the remnants of history that lie around like blind shells in the debris can be ignited here. Bottrop's canvases create space for such a detonation that only seems to end at the image's edge. In their gestural sprawl, his works confidently overcome their environment. While some epic formats dominate the venue like battle paintings; others interact with the architectural features, thus appropriating them. And then there are ones that intervene with the architecture like an installation defining the space—immediately occupying it with their presence. There's certainly a kind of megalomania at play here, along with the thought that memory is a kind of temporally nested space, expanding with each experience.

One could already see in the geometric forms of Bottrop's earlier works that he was bound to overcome them. The restless and exhaustible nature of his stroke defines a growing body of work that keeps redefining itself in the fast lane. Only those who keep developing themselves can stay alive—the artist probably learned this in his native Rhein-Ruhr area which was forced to transform so radically during his childhood, more so than any other region in West Germany. During this structural transformation, mining headframes were repurposed as cultural monuments; industrial brownfields, into ski halls and technology parks. The air has gotten cleaner since the last mining pit in Bottrop was closed. But the rough, direct mentality remains. One can recognize it in the pragmatism with which Peppi Bottrop staples his canvases to the studio wall so that the structure of the underlying plaster presses through. Or in a gesture whose urgency is in constant conflict with the doubting, correcting, and revising

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<sup>1</sup> The title of the work series exhibited at Sies + Höke.

<sup>2</sup> "Sorh" is an acronym of the aforementioned series title and also the Old English version of the Proto-Germanic term "sorg," which the German "Sorge" and English "sorrow" stem from.

rebellion against the self. Within the parameters he's defined for himself, the painter creates energy revolutions that decisively contribute to the variety and depth of his work.

At a time when the Junge Wilde are growing old, and young art all too often seems tamely opportunistic, painting is rarely conceived as a collision that is simultaneously constructive and destructive; that is driven by a kind of a clash—between eras, character traits, and the searching subject within a radically changing world. With Peppi Bottrop one has the stirring sense of being simultaneously off track and on the road. To borrow loosely from the literary psycho-geographer J.G. Ballard: “After being bombarded endlessly by road-safety propaganda it is almost a relief to find yourself in an actual accident.”

Text by Anna Sinofzik