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Annette Kelm

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Opening reception: March 14, 2014, 6 - 9 pm

Over the past few years, Annette Kelm's artistic work has, in an incomparably radical way, liberated the photographic image from its traditional assignations, thus giving an uncommon impetus to thinking about photographic images in the context of contemporary art. For despite all the consensual criticism of representation in the framework of debates specific to photography, the photographic medium with its reproductive function has remained above all a technique of showing and seeing. With her pictures, however, Annette Kelm unmistakably rescinds the promises of photography, rendering them null and void. Because she provokes precisely not the question what we see in her pictures, but shifts it rather in the direction of how we see. Seeing in itself is an issue in her work - as it is also in this current selection of both individual pictures and series of pictures created over the past two years and now on show in this, her third solo exhibition at Johann König, Berlin.

When we say that seeing itself forms a central element in Annette Kelm's artistic work, the statement holds true in two directions. On the one hand, her photographs assert a representational oeuvre which has its own autonomous compositional logic and quality, and, in this referential context, is also unconditionally independent of the media. One expression of the great autonomous power and impact of her pictures is precisely the fact that, from the very beginning, they were received within the context of contemporary art and were only gradually introduced into media-specific debates. On the other hand, Annette Kelm has grasped, as almost no other photographer, what conventions come into play when our eyes go searching over the surfaces of photographic images, constructing into a picture "something" that we would describe as reality-based. Other artists stress the carrier material, paper, or the chemical processes involved in order to point up the constructed character of the photographic image; further artists again make the image-generating grain visible as a constituting element in the analogue production process etc. Annette Kelm, however, remains within the pictorial objects themselves, working through of a variety of pictorial genres one-by-one in a strict, wellnigh formalized way, productively deploying a visual strategy of de-clarifying the element of signification so essential to photography. Understanding her still lifes, for example, demands that we fundamentally "make strange" the objects in her photographs so as to be able to decipher the allusive codes involved, which are often presented tongue-in-cheek. Because, although in her work everything is always openly on display, we get nowhere by using the habitual perceptual functions inscribed in photography. Her pictures of materials printed with acronyms such as "Soles, LOL!, C U SOON, XO, STUFF 2 DO", 2013, which both structure and dominate the pictorial space, are as much an expression of this as are her pictures of variously coloured Paisley pattern scarves, "Paisley and Wheat Red", 2013. Although both the one and the other subject may refer to, for example, (fashionable) accessories, we do not immediately identify it as such. Nevertheless, the reference to the - in each case different, culturally significant - histories

of the origins of the materials used, though not openly shown or explained, is written into the motifs. Thus Annette Kelm's pictures go beyond mere factual seeing and comprehending, oscillating instead on the fine boundary between seeing and knowing.

The fact that behind every picture there is always another picture lying in waiting is demonstrated also in connection with other motifs - for example when Annette Kelm decides to put the portrait of a person into a series, each image having minimal shifts in gesture or facial expression. "J'aime Paris", 2013. By means of this strategy she uncovers the logical processes behind looking at the picture - the comparative searching for the fine differences and for the "right" image in the serial context - thus destroying the expectations that follow a traditional concept of the portrait as genre.

The reception of Annette Kelm's works has long ignored the fact that, alongside their many allusions to the history of photography, they go hand in hand with a research-based interest in cultural history. In its essence, however, this interest came openly to the fore at the very latest in her "Big Prints", 2007, whose subject are decorative materials created by the American interior designer Dorothy Draper. This ongoing concern found more unequivocal form in photographs of glass-case displays on the history of the women's movement in the Federal Republic of Germany, which the artist came across in the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin. This new work is concerned with the question of the portrayability of complex political movements or their schematic narrowing-down in the context of a museum that with its few exhibits from contemporary history conveys an all too clichéd image and representation of a present-day period. The artist's photograph investigates the glass case as an instrument for the imparting of knowledge with a clear gesture of showing and educating - an instrument, however, whose excerpt-like quality not only fails to allow any in-depth approach but on the contrary even disparages history and historical contexts, shrinking them into a shop-window format which the historical figure of Baudelaire's flâneur would have taken pleasure in. The artist achieves the necessary critical distance by openly exhibiting also the camera, which is reflected in the glass of the case. Its presence makes clear that the images pass through the camera, but that the work and the thinking about the image do not come to an end at this juncture. Questioning the readability of signs and acting in opposition to them is a major driving force behind the artist's oeuvre and one that finds expression in this new work also.

Maren Lübbke-Tidow, 4.3.2014, Translated from German by Prof. Dr. R. Humphrey

Annette Kelm (* 1975, Stuttgart, Germany) lives and works in Berlin. Her work has been presented in solo and group exhibitions at international institutions, including MoMA, New York (2013), Presentation House Gallery, Vancouver (2012), Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main (2012), KW - Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2009), Kunsthalle Zurich (2009) and Witte de With, Rotterdam (2008). Her art works are in important art collections such as MoMa, New York, Centre Pompidou, Paris, Kulturstiftung des Bundes, Germany, Tate Modern, London and Collection Verbund, Vienna. Annette Kelm participated in the 12th Istanbul Biennial in 2012 and in the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011.