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Jochen Klein

9 February - 15 April 2017

Opening reception on Thursday, 9 February, 6-8pm

Galerie Buchholz is proud to announce our third exhibition of the artist Jochen Klein (1967-1997), following our initial solo exhibition of Jochen Klein's work in 1997 and a second exhibition in collaboration with the artist Peter Doig in 2004, both in our Cologne gallery. Opening at Galerie Buchholz New York, this will mark the first solo exhibition of Jochen Klein in America since his 1998 exhibition project at Hudson's Feature Inc. organized by Wolfgang Tillmans. The installation of the show at Galerie Buchholz New York has been conceived in collaboration with Julie Ault.

In 2008, Jochen Klein was the subject of a retrospective at the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue. Additional institutional solo and group shows include "The Undiscovered Country" at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, in 2004 (curated by Russell Ferguson), "Partnerships. Interrupted Careers" at the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin, in 2002 (curated by Frank Wagner), "Jochen Klein" at Kunstraum Munich and Cubitt, London, in 1998, "From the Corner of the Eye" at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1998, and "Oh Boy it's a Girl - Feminismen in der Kunst" at Kunstverein München in 1994 (Jochen Klein's contribution to this exhibition was a collaboration with the artist Thomas Eggerer). From 1994 through 1996, Jochen Klein was part of the artist collective Group Material, participating in the exhibition "Market" at the Kunstverein Munich in 1995, and in the Three Rivers Arts Festival in Pittsburgh in 1996.

"English Garden" *

Jochen Klein trained as a painter, then committed himself to a broad-ranging practice informed by social and political activism before returning to painting. At the time these shifts seemed—from the outside, at least—to be sharp changes in direction. Since Klein was only thirty years old when he died in 1997, however, all his work was made within a relatively short time frame. With thirteen years now having passed since his death, it is easier to begin to see his work as a whole, and to register the links between his varied activities, which seem more closely connected now than they might have done at the time. Shifts in an artist's practice do not necessarily follow on from one another in a neat sequence, like dominoes waiting in a line to be knocked down. The different elements in Klein's work overlap with and inform each other.

Klein attended the Munich Kunstakademie from 1989 until 1994, as a painter, studying primarily with Hans Baschang. [...] In 1993 Klein and a number of other students, including his close friends Eggerer and Amelie von Wulffen, also began to work with Helmut Draxler, who had become director of the Munich Kunstverein in 1992. [...] He introduced the Akademie students to a critical approach to art and art making that broadened their horizons through both readings and personal contact with the international artists whom he brought to the Kunstverein.

But the group of students who gravitated to Draxler had already developed their own doubts about the "master" system and the privileging of painting. They were reading the journal *Texte zur Kunst* and were

* This text by Russell Ferguson was originally published in: *Jochen Klein*, edited by Bernhart Schwenk, Pinakothek der Moderne, and Wolfgang Tillmans, pp. 21-24. München/Ostfildern: Pinakothek der Moderne and Hatje Cantz, 2011.

actively looking for other ways of working. Klein and Eggerer, in particular, were aware that elsewhere there was much more going on, especially around gay identity politics, and that much of this work was taking place in the United States. They were also interested in established artists whose practices seemed to have no German equivalent, in particular Vito Acconci and Dan Graham. They began to entertain the idea of attending the rigorous, theoretically oriented Whitney Independent Study Program in New York.

It was at this time that Klein and Eggerer began their collaboration, initially around questions of exhibition design that Draxler was raising at the Kunstverein and in classes he taught at the Akademie. The partnership between the two young artists began as writing, but quickly developed into an art-making collaboration too: a parallel practice to the work in painting that they each continued to pursue at the same time. As Eggerer recalls: "We chose each other to be in this artistic partnership. It was a deliberate choice, a way of taking the first step out of the Akademie."¹

In 1992 they visited New York, meeting a number of artists there who had attended the Whitney Program, including Tom Burr and his partner, Ull Hohn. Hohn, a German who had studied with Gerhard Richter in Düsseldorf, had moved to New York in 1986. He died, from AIDS, in 1995. Burr was beginning to work with ideas related to public space, architecture, and gay culture, while Hohn was making paintings that were increasingly ironic and deskilled, work that would culminate in a 1993 series based on the teachings of Bob Ross, the well-known TV painting instructor and paradigm of kitsch. At this time Klein had begun to move decisively away from painting, but this work by Hohn would exert a significant influence on him when he eventually returned to it.

Klein was already a voracious reader of theory and literature, but Hohn also introduced him to the work of a range of English-language writers, in particular to that of T. J. Clark. After returning to Munich, Klein and Eggerer, along with other students from the Akademie, began to work with Draxler on the exhibition *Die Utopie des Designs*, which would be presented at the Kunstverein in 1994. *Die Utopie des Designs* focused on modern design as a homogenizing element of social control. Klein contributed an essay on corporate design, identity, and culture.

In retrospect, Klein's move away from painting at this time is not very surprising. Many serious painters pass through a point of crisis or at least deep dissatisfaction with the medium itself. Richter himself has often continued to express a despairing view, as, for example, when he says that "all the utopias are shattered, everything goes down the drain, the wonderful time of painting is over."² So for Klein to withdraw from painting in this period was not necessarily to renounce it unequivocally and permanently. The withdrawal was more reflective of a dissatisfaction with the *discourse* of painting, especially within the context of the Kunstakademie. It was largely taken for granted that painting was an important medium, one in which big statements could be made. Toward the end of his time there, Klein had begun making paintings of nude women in lush landscapes that he identified explicitly, in a statement he wrote at the time, as "a parody of the macho-like image of the painter as conveyed by the academy."³

Yet even as he moved away from making paintings, Eggerer recalls that Klein "did not make any big deal out of not being a painter."⁴ His step away from painting might be better thought of as a deliberate pause—a pause in which he could think and reflect on how he wanted to work, and how he wanted his work to function in the world. In a joint 1994 statement for the Akademie, Klein and Eggerer insisted that "the shift in our approach from purely painterly work to work based more on studies of areas outside of art was accompanied by a gradual redefinition of our self-understanding as artists. The idea, however, is not to chuck off or deny painting as a chapter in our exploration but to question it as part of our artistic reorientation."⁵

It was at this point that the two took their collaboration beyond writing, with the site-specific project *Leave a Message*, the documentation of which was subsequently shown in the Kunstverein exhibition *Oh Boy, It's A Girl*. The piece consisted of a message board installed on the outside wall of a public toilet that was a well-known gay cruising place in the Englischer Garten, a Munich park. The work sought to give an overtly public presence to the hidden, private activity that was taking place in this nominally public setting. The board was an invitation to gay men to leave any message they chose, but in so doing, to come out into a more public space; in a way to take some ownership of it. As Eggerer recalls, the piece, done without any official permission, was "a radical break with everything we had done before."⁶ The work shows the influence of Burr's articulation of the conjunction between public and private sexualized spaces, but also introduces a direct appeal for community involvement that would prove to be influential in Klein and Eggerer's later

collaborations. For the time being, however, the piece was also a kind of experiment. “We could be so bold because we had nothing to lose. We didn’t know if we could use it for anything,”⁷ Eggerer says. As students in an era when artists were not expected to emerge fully-formed from art school, they felt free to experiment as they wished, without any expectations for what it could lead to.

In May 1994, the two men met Doug Ashford and Julie Ault of the New York artists’ collective Group Material, which had been active since 1979. They were in Munich to prepare for their exhibition *Market*, which would be presented at the Kunstverein the following year. Group Material’s collaborative way of working marked a sharp contrast to the predominant German model of master and students. “Our working method might best be described as painfully democratic,” they wrote in a collective statement. “We are not interested in making definitive evaluations or declarative statements, but in creating situations that offer our chosen subject as a complex and open-ended issue.”⁸ This open, critique-based practice was enormously attractive to the two young artists seeking to make a break with their academic training, and they threw themselves into the collaborative process, quickly becoming full members of the group. *Market* consisted entirely of consumer items and information, focusing on the way corporations are able to co-opt symbols of rebellion and turn them into products or selling points. One hundred and fifty advertising slogans, all suggesting individual empowerment, were stripped of the associated product name and applied to the walls. Typical examples included “Make the Connection”; “It’s the Right Thing to Do”; “Find Your Life in Ours”; and “Solutions for a Small Planet.” There were no artworks as such in the exhibition at all.

Even before becoming members of Group Material, Klein and Eggerer were already convinced that it was time to leave Munich for New York. Their use of an English title for *Leave a Message* was perhaps already a signal of this desire. They were turned down for admission to the Whitney Program, but Eggerer won a DAAD fellowship to go to New York, for painting, and he and Klein moved there in the summer of 1994, both of them also affiliating themselves with the nonresident graduate program at Vermont College. They would return to Munich only for the installation of *Market* the following spring.

In February 1995, Klein began a relationship with Wolfgang Tillmans, who had independently moved to New York the previous summer. Tillmans’s embrace of an overtly aesthetic approach to image making alongside a personal commitment to political activism and social justice may have suggested to Klein an alternative way of working to the more rigorously institutional critique-driven aspects of his New York environment.

To support themselves, Klein and Eggerer worked as waiters, and they continued their commitment to Group Material, which by that point was already reaching a fairly late stage in its trajectory. Felix Gonzalez-Torres was less and less involved with the group’s activities, which were mostly in the hands of Ashford and Ault. Gonzalez-Torres died of AIDS-related illness in January 1996. His work had been decisive, for Klein and for many others, in the value it gave to individual sensibility alongside a resolutely materialist critique of the society in which that sensibility sought to assert itself.

While everyone in Group Material was committed to a genuinely collaborative process, the inevitably unbalanced dynamic between the two long-established members and the two young newcomers meant that Klein and Eggerer’s role remained somewhat ambiguous. They tended to respond to ideas initiated by the others rather than introduce projects themselves. Gonzalez-Torres’s death had dispirited Ashford and Ault, and it became increasingly clear that everyone’s enthusiasm was waning.

Group Material’s final project was for the Three Rivers Arts Festival, in Pittsburgh, in 1996. By that date a process of institutionalization and professionalization had started to form around activities that had begun as self-sustaining, community-based projects. Group Material, recognized as pioneers in this field, increasingly found themselves the recipients of invitations to participate in projects for which they were expected to articulate community issues. The Pittsburgh festival was one such situation. Wrestling with the question of how to do work that was community-specific in a community in which none of them had ever lived, the group focused their intervention on the festival’s calendar of events, introducing anonymous and often contradictory comments from residents about the city and how it was experienced. In their project statement, they wrote that their goal was “to introduce unarticulated perspectives and voices into the official festival arena and to construct a picture of ‘community’ and ‘the city’ as indeterminate and contested.”⁹ The project was coherent, but also limited and even somewhat defensive in its deflection of authorship. Group Material ended its activities that fall.

Eggerer and Klein did do one project on their own that year: a window installation—*IKEA*—at the downtown art bookstore Printed Matter. For this work they revisited some of the themes raised by *Die Utopie des Designs*. A critique of the gentrified SoHo lifestyle that implied a connection between IKEA and terrorism, the piece featured a schematic drawing of a hideout apartment used by the Baader-Meinhof Group: a bourgeois (IKEA) room at the front, visible if and when the door was opened; behind that an empty room strewn with mattresses. The work both participated in a critical, research-based practice and at the same time gently parodied it. This lightness of touch—not too serious, but not unserious either—would be a quality much in evidence when Klein decisively returned to painting, which he did later that same year. Eggerer would himself begin to paint again early the following year.

Tillmans had returned to London in February of 1996, and Klein joined him there in September. Tillmans's example had no doubt contributed to Klein's return to picture making, which had begun even before he finally left New York, although this move in his work was not one that Tillmans had specifically encouraged. In London the two worked at first in the same studio, and Klein also began to meet some London painters, notably, Peter Doig.

The paintings that Klein began to make at this time predominately depicted figures in soft, mutable landscapes. There is, however, a thread that links the more explicitly critique-based projects to the new paintings, in that both explore questions of kitsch. Kitsch had been an early interest of Klein's in Munich, and was a recurring motif in Group Material's work, which consistently challenged conventional hierarchies of critical discrimination. The paintings push the boundaries of conventional artistic good taste with their figures drawn from vulgar sources in popular illustration and advertising. Often these appropriated images are vignettted. Klein's technique disrupts the seamlessness of the original source material, but the image is not disrupted in the modernist tradition of sharp cutting and abrupt juxtaposition. Instead vignetting calls the image into question by using the techniques of kitsch itself, of a commercialized Romanticism that is soft rather than sharp, dissolving as much as disrupting.

As Nick Mauss has written about this work, getting directly to the most uncomfortable point: "I am reminded by these works of the potential for paintings to embarrass."¹⁰ The gauzy soft-core photographs of David Hamilton, epitome of a "tasteful" tastelessness, lurk behind them. If there is any painterly point of comparison, it is with Richard Hamilton, in particular a work such as *Soft Pink Landscape* (1971–72), which combined lush painterly effects with images lifted from toilet paper advertisements. [...] As Manfred Hermes has written, "What concerned Klein here was the debased, over-sentimentalised image that hovers uncertainly between lying and longing, between beauty and parody, but nevertheless can offer self-perception, can channel emotional longings."¹¹

Since Klein really was an extraordinarily good painter in terms of traditional technique, his return to painting inevitably opened up his work to the risk of more or less reactionary interpretation, in which his work would be evaluated in terms of paint handling, composition, and brushwork, etc. But in the end the paintings remain highly resistant to co-option into the traditional rhetoric of the medium. They always have a subversive quality, including the subversion of painting itself. In praising the work, one is often brought up short by the realization that the painting in question does, after all, show two young girls in a field of flowers, or a ballerina, or a couple of cute but disturbingly large geese passing by a shirtless young man. The relative mainstreaming of elements of camp taste since the mid-nineties might lead contemporary viewers to underestimate how awkward and out of place these paintings seemed when they were made, but even today they retain a discomfiting quality, redolent of guilty, half-concealed pleasures. Klein forces the element of kitsch and parody, using it as a critical shield behind which he can sneak in—most unexpectedly—real feeling. Klein loved painting. Yet he also felt the need to step back from it when it ran any risk of taking itself too seriously, of becoming pompous. He found a way to use painting as a reflexive medium to both conceal and enable the expression of personal emotion.

The paintings are lush, tempting the viewer with Romantic implications. Yet we can still see traces all through them of Klein's earlier work. They stand against the homogenizing tyranny of design and good taste. Instead, they propose a bucolic vision of multiple overlapping elements and sources of satisfaction, a pictorial English Garden in which we as viewers can take our own pleasures. Leave a message.

Notes

- 1 Thomas Eggerer, conversation with the author, August 31, 2009.
- 2 Gerhard Richter, interview with Robert Storr (2001) in Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting* (New York, 2003), p. 172.
- 3 Jochen Klein (untitled, unpublished manuscript, Munich, 1994).
- 4 Eggerer, conversation, 2009 (see note 1).
- 5 Thomas Eggerer and Jochen Klein (untitled, unpublished manuscript, Munich, 1994).
- 6 Eggerer, conversation, 2009 (see note 1).
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Group Material, "On Democracy," in *Democracy: A Project by Group Material* (Seattle, 1990), p. 2.
- 9 Group Material, "Project Statement," in Julie Ault, ed., *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material* (London, 2010), p. 204.
- 10 Nick Mauss, "Abandoned Painting," *Artforum* (October 2008), p. 359.
- 11 Manfred Hermes, "Past Present Tension" in *Peter Doig, Jochen Klein* (Cologne, 2004), p. 13.