



Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany

wall texts from exhibition: VISITE. From Gerhard Richter to Rebecca Horn

Works from the Contemporary Art Collection of the Federal Republic of Germany |

11 April - 17 August 2008

Visite

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An exhibition of the Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany in collaboration with the Federal Commissioner for Culture and Media (Beauftragter der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien / BKM)

The title of this exhibition already suggests a temporally delimited visit: *Visite* was conceived and shown in Brussels in spring of 2007 to mark the occasion of the German presidency of the EU Council.

The word *Visite* – whose meaning vacillates between 'to visit' and 'to inspect' – points toward the exhibition's immediate intention: the presentation of selections of a collection, an expanded version of which is now on view in Bonn.

The show is organized thematically, and is divided into three chapters dealing with the topics 'Existence', 'Space' and 'History'. Presented in exemplary fashion through these thematic foci are approximately 60 artistic positions from the past 20 years. This arrangement not only generates dialogic encounters between pairs of individual works, but also creates striking and telling linkages between various techniques and media, from drawing, painting and sculpture to photography and video. Finally, the exhibition's thematic triad can be interpreted as an overarching theme, namely the 'Existential Space of History'. The viewing of individual works in this configuration allows the human existential agitation embodied in art to become comprehensible as an integral question.

Appearing in a German-English edition in conjunction with the exhibition is a catalogue.

Besides introductory essays on the collection and brief chapters on the exhibition, this volume offers brief commentaries on individual works as well as information on the responsibilities, structure, and holdings of the Bundeskunstsammlung.

The Federal Republic of Germany's Contemporary Art Collection

The German government has been collecting art since 1970. Coming together over a period of 35 years has been a wide-ranging collection of German art. While this collection does document artistic production in Germany, it provides no comprehensive picture of the development of art in the Federal Republic.

The 'Bundeskunstsammlung' was initiated by Willy Brandt, then Federal Chancellor. He took up an idea presented by Georg Meistermann, Chairman of the Deutsche Künstlerbund (Association of German Artists). Initially, the collection stood under the aegis of the Interior Minister; today it is administered by the Minister of State for the Federal Chancellor Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media.

There exists no fixed abode where the collection can be viewed on a regular basis. Works are loaned to public institutions, to ministries, embassies, to the Federal Chancellery, as well as to numerous German museums. It is mainly through temporary exhibitions that the collection is made accessible to the public.

Decisions concerning purchases for the Bundeskunstsammlung are made by an independent commission consisting of experts in the field. Its members – who work without compensation – are appointed for three-year intervals by officials from the Federal Agency for Culture and Media. In order to make purchases, members meet at three major art fairs taking place in Basel, Berlin and Cologne. Currently available to them is an annual budget of almost €500,000.



Despite its official character and high quality criteria, the Bundeskunstsammlung is not a museum collection. Rather, it represents the highly varied convictions and collecting strategies of its changing purchasing committee, which is not in a position to acquire works by universally acclaimed artists at correspondingly high prices. Certain gaps, then, must be accepted: a number of recognized artists, including Georg Baselitz, Markus Lüpertz and A.R. Penck, for example, are represented only by works on paper. Others, including Gerhard Richter, are represented by single works, while there are none by Anselm Kiefer. Given current trends in the art market, such deficiencies will be virtually impossible to remedy.

Today, the federal collection encompasses nearly 1200 works. With a few exceptions, acquisitions are of works produced after 1949. Represented are all genres of the fine arts – from prints to installations, from photography to video.

Published for the first time in the catalogue, is a comprehensive list of all commissions and purchases.

Existence – Space – History

Who are we, where do we come from? Throughout the history of images, questions relating to the meaning of existence have persistently been central themes: images facilitate dialogue between human existence and divine forces. Ever since the Renaissance, the human being has been portrayed in all of his or her individuality. Contemporary artists too explore the conditions of their own existences, and those of others as well. They are concerned with power relations between individuals, as well as with abstract philosophical questions related to the essences of things and people. In this collection of contemporary art, a multiplicity of artistic approaches can be traced from the 1960s right up until the present day. We find both classical portraits as well as installations and sculptures which pose questions about forms of life in the 20th and 21st centuries: How do we live? Which societal, cultural and political conditions have an impact on contemporary notions of existence?

Although strongly resembling a photograph, Gerhard Richter's *Sekretärin* (Secretary, 1964) is in fact a painting. The image is based on a seemingly ephemeral, almost chance impression of a figure. In fact, the artistic prototype was drawn from a newspaper. Richter published his photographic source material in *Atlas*, his collection of found visual materials. The schematic impression made by the depicted woman in the original photograph was retained by Richter when he translated it into a painting that is reminiscent of a snapshot. In this work, Richter thematises the relationship between painting and photography, as well as that between personal identity and socially shaped cliché representations.

Martin Kippenberger confronts his role as an artist in an ironic fashion. For his *POP IT OUT* (1995), he asked artistic colleagues to design posters for exhibitions of his works. In so doing, Kippenberger adopts the role of client, generating commentaries on his own role as a public artistic figure from a variety of angles.

Anna and Bernhard Blume stage themselves in their images. *Hänsel und Gretel* (Hansel and Gretel, 1990/91) displays a bizarre scene from the series *Im Wald* (In The Forest): here, this artistic couple slips into the roles of the celebrated German fairytale siblings. Both look bourgeois, and seem (given the situation in which they find themselves) inappropriately dressed: they cling to and slide down tree branches in the dark German forest, indicated here by just a few tree stumps. *Hänsel und Gretel* ironically thematises childhood memory, Germany's cultural patrimony, and the bourgeois division of roles between male and female.

Rebecca Horn's sculpture *Paradieswitwe* (Widow of Paradise, 1975) makes a majestic impression: the artist herself once wore this object, covered in black chicken feathers, providing partial views of her naked body by opening and closing its wing-like elements. Implicated in this play between the female body and the masculine, feathered costume are relationships of visibility and invisibility, disclosure



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and concealment. Today, the objects is accompanied by a photo series of Horn's performance; seemingly the product of a process of metamorphosis, it is always presented in its closed position.

Details from the everyday life of a metropolis are seen in Wolfgang Tillmans' large format photographs taken from the London Underground (2000). The individual images are named for the transport lines he rode while shooting. Tillmans' close-ups of individual body parts, items of clothing, and rapid shifts of view mirror the confinement of the subway compartment. The crowding and bodily closeness between strangers is almost palpable, while at the same time, we are aware of their attempts to maintain mutual distance.

Existence - Space – **History**

To recall real or imagined events is a basic human need. The confrontation with memory and history, then, is a central theme of contemporary art. Rather than according it a single chapter, it is allowed to permeate the exhibition as a whole. We encounter both political depictions of history as well as personal narratives, invented histories and interpretations of historical fact. Resonating again and again is the question of how history is constructed, of that which is conveyed via recollection, and of that which is excluded from such transmissions.

Individual works deal with German history and with the formation of national identity. Among these is Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Siegerkränze* (Victor's Laurels, 2001), for which the artist recreated 24 laurel crowns from the archive of the Formula One driver Heinz-Harald Frentzen, stacking them to form a sculpture of trophies. Through an object that could serve simultaneously as trophy and burial object, Tiravanija alludes to the ambiguity of award ceremonies. He thereby comments on the mental constitution of an entire nation for which competitive ideas play such an important role.

Jörg Immendorff's small format painting *Pass (Deutsche Farben)* (Passport (German Colours), 1965) displays the German national colours. Legible upon closer inspection is the artist's family name, inscribed literally in the painting in yellow on yellow. *Pass* provides testimony of Immendorff's early critical confrontation with German politics and with the relationship between citizen, state and identity.

Georg Herold constructed an image of Germany from unfinished roof battens, entitling it *Deutschland in den Grenzen von 1937* (Germany within its 1937 Borders, 1985). Two years before the inception of World War II, national Socialist propaganda reached a crescendo: Germany's national boundaries were questioned, while armaments production reached its highpoint. The program known as 'Entartete Kunst' (Degenerate Art) allow thousands of artworks to vanish from German museums, their creators maligned. Herold recalls these historical events, alluding to the subsequent course of history through the handwritten notations of the names of enterprises, cities, and federal states.

Katharina Sieverding's *Deutschland wird deutscher* (Germany becoming more German, 1992) is exhibitionist in the truest sense of the word: in 1993, a paper version of the large-format work was posterized throughout the city of Berlin. Shown is a portrait of the artist, who appeared in a circus in the early 1970s as a partner of a knife thrower. Set above the image is a text drawn from newspaper headlines. Sieverding plays on associations with Germany's past, and with the influence of text on our perception of images – and vice versa.

The setting of Neo Rauch's *Der Auftrag* (The Task, 1996) seems strongly encoded. Action sequences and objects are placed alongside and above one another in the pictorial space almost like stencils. Although figures and objects are clearly recognizable, their relationships to one another, the activities being performed, and the significance of the arrangement as a whole remains enigmatic.

Recognizable in Daniel Richter's painting with the multivalent title *Europa – immer Ärger mit der Sogenannten* (Europe: Always Trouble with the So-Called, 1999) are only vaguely indicated spatial



relationships and figurative elements. At the same time, the act of painting is strongly present in this powerfully chromatic image through traces of dried paint. Alluded to in the title is both the continent and the political union of states, as well as the antique figure of Europa, who was carried off by Zeus in the form of a bull to the island of Crete where she was seduced by the God.

Existence – **Space** – History

Space can be experienced both corporeally and mentally: nature and architecture, temporal frames, the growth of scientific knowledge, collective life in its various forms, and human powers of imagination provoke highly divergent, perpetually changing perceptions of that which we experience as space. The enormous upheavals of the 20th and 21st centuries, the overcoming of distance, the political reorganization of the global map, and the increasing significance of electronic data worlds have led to decisive transformations. Inevitably, questions regarding the shaping of our sense of reality by spatial ideas constitute a central theme in contemporary art.

Thomas Struth shows us specific locations in his photographs. His inconspicuous, empty street corners or urban nooks and crannies are capable of triggering highly personal recollections in viewers. These seemingly everyday perspectives are also documents of historical change: this West German artist photographed these scenes in East German cities and in East Berlin shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1991/92.

Heidi Specker too photographs objects of urban architecture that are rarely the focus of attention. But Specker arrives at very different types of image than does Struth. She photographs the details of Berlin façades and reworks them digitally (*Teilchentheorie*, Particle Theory, 1998). In the process, contrasts and degrees of focus are often almost imperceptibly altered. The results are autonomous and as a rule abstract spatial and surface structures. Specker thereby shifts the focus of interest to the post-war German architecture that continues to shape many cityscapes up to the present day.

The potential of built space to elicit or trigger feelings of anxiety and desire is demonstrated by the photographs of Gregor Schneider (*Der Deutsche Beitrag – Venedig, Totes Haus u r / The German Contribution – Venice, Dead House u r*, 2001). His photo series documents the reproduction of a residential house found in Rheydt, which Schneider has maintained in a perpetually state of reconstruction since 1985. With this replica, erected in the German Pavilion in Venice, the artist won the “Golden Lion” at the Venice Biennale in 2001. These rooms are deserted, making an impression of abandonment and menace: blank walls, blocked-off views, and pitfalls evoke a sense of violence and hopelessness.

Johannes Kahrs’ picture *Thomson homestead, Slater – Missouri* (1997) shows a location whose effect is one of oppressiveness. As prototypes for his extraordinarily minute drawings, Kahrs often uses images found in the mass media, including newspapers. He often uses only a single detail from a found image, on which the work is then based. Here, we see the house where US-American actor Steve McQueen spent part of his childhood. Yet Kahrs’ depiction of the building conveys no feeling of home; instead, he shows us an uncanny locale, one reminiscent of the actor’s difficult childhood. The degree to which scientific knowledge and societal transformations condition our image of Earth is shown by Ingo Günther in his work cycle *Worldprocessor* (1999), in progress since 1988. Using the surfaces of more than 300 globes, Günther displays various statistics and data related to climate change, the routes of electronic data flows, and the political formation of states. The result is a series of new world maps lying somewhere between science and art, which deploy a variety of colours and structures to convey an impression of highly intricate states of affairs.