

Katharina Gruzei, “Bodies of Work”

Opening:

Thursday, 21.03.2019, 19:00. Charim Galerie, Dorotheergasse 12, 1010 Vienna

Duration: 22.03. - 11.05.2019

For her solo show in the Charim Galerie, Katharina Gruzei has created rooms with references, allusions and quotations that are distantly focussed on the term ‘work’. A photograph in which the depicted object is a piece of metal serves as the source for the entire show that follows. The photo shows a milled form, the shine of the material that has been worked and the metal shavings. It also conveys the amount of energy and power that is necessarily expended in order to work hard metals. The water – coolant, lubricant, rinse – in the photo might well be seen as the equivalent of workers’ sweat, the photo as a whole the abstract and iconic condensation of what, for a long time, dominated work as a subject – the glorification of physical activity and sweat. The physical counterpart to the photographed shavings can be found in the last room of the gallery as a ‘heavy metal’ assertion of reality, an artist’s gesture that already has its own art history. In this exhibition it is given an additional, consciously-chosen function. The film screened by Katharina Gruzei in the exhibition likewise bundles content, providing a framework for the show.

“Workers leaving the factory”: women and men enter the long, curved factory corridor. Initially individually, but soon they begin to form loosely bunched groups stepping forward. Unhurried they head in the direction of an undefined destination, imperturbable despite the flickering light and occasional darkness. They must be intimately familiar with the location in order to simply continue without panic or any noticeable reaction. The sounds of the repetitive flickering, of the neon light and light fixtures, imparts rhythm to their movements as if we were watching an afterimage of the monotonous work operations that have been synchronised by the processes of industrial rationalisation. Furthermore, deeply resonating echoes fill the room, giving the scenes the dystopian distance science fiction blockbusters have vividly created for us to watch. These are breath-taking stories of faraway planets, gigantic technical projects and dehumanised work. The editing, sound and composition of the scenes in Katharina Gruzei’s film allow us to become a part of this going, and going further, up to the moment when the camera perspective changes and individual groups come to a standstill, looking straight into the camera. Individuals and their characteristics become recognisable; individuals and groups of workers. These momentary pauses are followed by silence, blackness and a scene which is a reference to the silent film that inspired Katharina Gruzei to the composition and substance of her own film, the Lumière brothers “La sortie des usines Lumière a Lyon”.

The short film from 1895 has a remarkable reception history and also throw light on the Lumière brothers concern to show what their invention, the new medium of “moving images”, was capable of: to create the illusion of movement by projecting light on a screen. Furthermore, the title is interesting, indicating as it does the industrial production of film as a product by the two commercially active entrepreneurs who certainly considered it to be a piece of advertising.

So the factory entrances/exits, used as a motif in the film, become a threshold beyond which the human body becomes subject to the principles of industrial order and production, while the passage out of the factory into everyday life, the living chaos of individual strivings, is also rendered visible.

Visitors enter the exhibition: Photographs can be seen that Katharina Gruzei made of Austria's last Danube shipyard (ÖSWAG) where she followed the building of a large ferry boat are to be seen, some grouped. In the exhibition this knowledge is conveyed little by little because it is also centred on the concept of a pathway. This includes the order and rhythm of the photographs themselves in their content thus the work of exhibition-making is also on display. The title, "Bodies of Work" intones a semantic double sound that firstly suggests people working, the history of photographic and filmic staged bodies in the midst of the unavoidable ideological noise of the surroundings. But "Bodies of Work" is also a complex of works. It comprises individual motifs intentionally recorded at different times and under different lighting conditions in order to be able to use them as elements in an interpretive schema that allows photography to become an experiential vehicle and the pathways of reception of an experiential process.

The dystopian currents of Katharina Gruzei's film also flood the first room of the exhibition where photographs show people whose protective clothing turns them into the objects of workshops and workpieces. A machine, rust-coloured and flocked with clouds of dust stares into space through the eyes of metering dials; welding light illuminates the darkness and flying red sparks awaken associations with stars at the centre of a stellar cloud. A distant moon and diffuse floodlight illuminate a round object. It is only the human hand that displays a key ring in the form of an anchor that encourages the thought that space, too, has become navigable, after the oceans of the world. And it also appears to be a spacecraft that is being built in the workshop next door. The second room then has the function of an (air)lock – here faces are recognisable and the colourful headwear of one worker becomes a liberating anecdotal moment. The boat is a ferry for Lake Zurich and it is the workers that will build it together. In the final room of the show Katharina Gruzei varies the individual themes with further photographs and their configurations, placing the focus on workers and their workpieces. An ethos of creation by physical work becomes palpable including the authority of status that used to be associated with it.

And still is. The Linz shipyard is still building boats and producing large machine parts. A mound of heaped metal shavings bears witness to this: the work of milling, which creates forms that are standardised in their function, practicality and fit from heavy, amorphous blocks of metal, also produced the material for an artwork of heaped shavings.

Notice: on Saturday, 6 April 2019 we will be presenting the book "Bodies of Work".

Brunch and conversation between Ruth Horak (author), Herman Seidl (Fotohof edition), Christian Konrad (graphic design), Katharina Gruzei (artist)