

Stefan Burger

Unused props and clearance goods; photographs with absent bodies

by Burkhard Meltzer

Opposite:
Generalprobe der Weggebliebenen mit den Weggegangenen (Dress Rehearsal by Those who Stayed Away with Those who've already Left) 2009
Inkjet print
Dimensions variable

Below left:
Totalliquidation: 70% auf alle Treppen, 50% auf alle Glühbirnen, 30% auf alle Leitern, 40% auf alle Zimmerpflanzen (Total liquidation: 70% off all staircases, 50% off all lightbulbs, 30% off all ladders, 40% off all houseplants) 2009
Lambda print
135×110 cm

Below middle:
Konstruktivistisch gestütztes Hobbypunctum (Constructivist Support for a Hobby Punctum) 2006
Acrylic on wood, inkjet print
160×140×90 cm

Below right:
Sprung ins Leere unter Begutachtung einer Expertenkommission (Jump into the Void Under the Inspection of a Commission of Experts) 2006
Inkjet print, wood, concrete, metal
400×200×80 cm



For his exhibition in the staircase hall of Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Stefan Burger presented visitors with reduced-to-clear items from a builder's merchants and D.I.Y. store. The work's elaborate title promises bargains: 'Total liquidation: 70% off all staircases, 50% off all lightbulbs, 30% off all ladders, 40% off all houseplants' (*Totalliquidation: 70% auf alle Treppen, 50% auf alle Glühbirnen, 30% auf alle Leitern, 40% auf alle Zimmerpflanzen*, 2009). But Burger only provided the articles in the form of framed photographs, taken against a blue studio backdrop (the houseplant no longer seems to be in the land of the living). A few metres away, in the large photographic wallpaper *Generalprobe der Weggebliebenen mit den Weggegangenen* (Dress Rehearsal by Those who Stayed Away with Those who've already Left, 2009), props wait for protagonists: rolls of cut-price carpet, a table and a few free-standing wall sections with a range of surfaces. The objects have been arranged one last time. Unfortunately, however, the actors didn't show up and the technical preparation of the props was carried out by people who have already left; a doll on a ladder is the only humanoid in view. Are we too late for the big closing-down sale? The objects seem to suggest so; but it's hard to tell whether the last show is in progress, has already finished, or is about to start.

In installations using photographs or film, Burger establishes highly unstable moments between artistic production, photographic reproduction, institutional presentation, location and viewer. But in spite of the acute symptoms of dissolution, Burger's photographic scenes are always carefully set up, choreographed and lit. As on a classical theatre stage, the monochrome

backgrounds and the deep black fields where the lighting doesn't reach are reminders of the limits of the picture's illusory space. In the case of *Konstruktivistisch Gestütztes Hobbypunctum* (A Constructivist Support to a Hobby Punctum, 2006), the constructed nature of the work is made literal by four pieces of wood in pastel shades screwed together in an elaborately 'constructivist' manner, turning a large-format photograph on a wooden panel into a free-standing object. The mid-20th-century amateur image shows a group of five girls dreamily looking at a point somewhere above the camera lens. What is the 'punctum' here? (This is the term used by Roland Barthes in his 1980 text *Camera Lucida* for the unexpected flash of significance in a photograph, that which 'pricks' the viewer.) In Burger's work, this particular effect, rather than providing flights of imagination, becomes the 'hobby-punctum' of an amateur image in desperate need of physical support.

In the installation *Untitled (Completely Transmitted by Chopin)* (2008) at Doll, Lausanne, reminders of things absent – including a piano piece allegedly conveyed by Frédéric Chopin to the medium L.B. – come straight from the hereafter. The recording is from the compilation *Okkulte Stimmen – Mediale Musik* (Recordings of Unseen Intelligences, 1905–2007) released by Berlin-based music publishers supposé verlag, and its style is reminiscent of Chopin, although the connection to the romantic composer can, of course, be neither proven nor refuted. Rather than contenting himself with a reference in the spirit of Sigmar Polke's series 'Höhere Wesen befehlen' (Higher Beings Ordain, 1968), however, Burger keeps searching for the figure of the absent third party. The piano music is accompanied by barely visible shadow-play figures cast onto the wall by a converted 16mm film projector. On the projector's drive unit sits a well-worn toothbrush. Lit by a photographer's spotlight,

the brush turns on its own axis as an extension of the rotational mechanism. The tool for personal hygiene becomes a nervously rotating monument to a body that requires dental care but which is, once again, absent.

The artist's first major solo show, at Kunsthau Baselland, Basel, in 2008, highlighted the mysterious character of the 'Runaway Sculptor' in its title. A photographic billboard from the eponymously titled work includes a scene from the manufacturing process for a forthcoming sculptural piece that was in production when the picture was taken. Sadly, though, the process seems unlikely to lead to the intended product, as the liquid material flows inexorably out of the plastic mould that is held between two wooden restles. At some point, the manufacturing process was simply left to its own devices and the unfortunate course of events is clear. In his presentation of the processes of everyday physics, Burger's gallows humour relates not least to the photographic test set-ups of absurd object constellations developed by artist duo Peter Fischli and David Weiss in seminal works such as their 'Stiller Nachmittag' ('Quiet Afternoon', also known as 'Equilibrium' series, 1984–5). In spite of the escape attempt, the person who ran away will always remain linked to the work by the reference in its title. But who is behind the identity of this elusive third party? An unknown co-author or the artist's alter ego? Or perhaps the piece is just a record of the inhibited production attempts of an anonymous fellow artist? As with most of his works, Burger leaves the case, and his viewers, unsettled.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

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