

Kerstin Engholm Galerie

Eva Grubinger

Café Nihilismus

Opening: 15/05/2014, 6 p.m.

Exhibition: 16/05/2014 – 21/06/2014

Press release

A rapid development of new technologies and scientific discoveries, a resultant feeling that reality is speeding up and even out of control: the mood and texture of our current moment strongly resemble those of a century ago. In Eva Grubinger's *Café Nihilismus*, the two eras interweave. Framed by yellow neon writing whose very form offers up the first of numerous curving forms, the sequence of sculptures and 2D works flickeringly suggests a phantasmal bar: coffee culture and the discursive space around it being central, not least to Vienna, in the early twentieth century and now a staple of twenty-first century life.

Near the rear of Grubinger's exhibition, relatedly, are objects that refract the material culture of café life. A suspended sculpture intersects aspects of a Thonet chair, the hallmark seating of Viennese cafés and representative of a new form of furniture: mass-produced, delivered flat-packed.

A floor-based circular slab of marble, meanwhile, is suggestive of a bistro table, albeit one that has fallen violently to earth, and is apparently crushing a small furry animal – a mink, perhaps, like those worn a century ago on the Ringstrasse – its phallic tail visible. These tables and chairs were featured in Vienna's Café Museum, whose reductive interior was designed in 1899 by Adolf Loos. Austro-Hungarian writer and journalist Ludwig Hevesi – a supporter of the Viennese Secession, and the inventor of the saying "Every time should have its own art, and the art should have its freedom", emblazoned above the entrance – nicknamed this place "Café Nihilismus".

Speed and movement, meanwhile, are materialized in an elegantly distended sculpture that contains echoes of a racing bicycle and equally, in its very form, articulates a gap between one point and another. A 10m long, curving metal contour on the floor reveals itself as a tram track – its contorted space echoing the form of the bicycle sculpture – and as a nudge towards the curve of time. Time, this exhibition suggests, does not move smoothly and in one direction. For time, Einstein clarified via relativity theory a hundred years ago, resembles a curve, and is inseparable from space. Time races, at points; and yet simultaneously it can appear to stand still, be petrified.

A questioning of time's properties was in the air in Vienna during the first third of the twentieth century, as was a contested notion of the 'fourth dimension' with which modernist artists and writers were fascinated. See, for example, Egon Friedell's playful 1930s novel *The Return of the Time Machine*, in which Friedell questions the scientific accuracy of HG Wells's 1895 novel *The Time Machine*.

In Vienna today, the type of tables and chairs seen in the original "Café Nihilismus" are still staples; and contemporary art is still haunted, if not always this knowingly, by the modern. In the innovational space of modern art that was simultaneous with Einstein's postulations, of course, two of the chief motifs (see Picasso and Braque, see Duchamp's first readymade *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913) were the café and the bicycle. What is widely thought to be the first collage, the key format of the twentieth century and beyond, featured, like Grubinger's suspended sculpture, caning from a café chair (Pablo Picasso, *Still Life with Chair Caning*, 1912). Collage equates to fragmentation, a condition that has only become more endemic from the dawn of modernity to the distracted mindset we've been bequeathed by the vast collage of the Internet.

The exterior world will imprint itself on, and distort, the interior: it is no coincidence that another abstracted sculpture here cleaves to the form of a Le Corbusier chaise longue, but wraps it in the literal fabric of mercantile society, the pinstripe. References commingle: Loos was famous for wearing pinstripe suits. The fabric suggests the male world of business, a world further alluded to in the exhibition as a whole, where only men are represented: a gender imbalance that one cannot call wholly historical. The sculpture, meanwhile, suggests the psychiatrist's couch, and also a substitute body (indeed, many of these works suggest the body) yet it's ambiguous whether the body in this case represents that of the analyst or the analysand. The material, wrapped around a tubular frame, might also recall a straitjacket or body bag. This slippage points up an attention, here, to a crisis of perception: not knowing the truth of what we are looking at. See, for example, among the 2D works in the back room, a receipt from a shop run by Karl Kraus, from the mid-1920s – yet it's not the acerbic aphorist, but a dealer of building materials by the same name.

All of this relates to a key concern of Café Nihilismus: a high attention to, and sense of the importance and possible deceptiveness of, surfaces. Our moment, Grubinger reminds us via strategies of wrapping, polishing, and counterposing textures, is one defined by the surface of things – by the dazzle of the screen and of consumer culture. Surfaces are political, surfaces are disguises. As culture looks back a hundred years to the outset of the First World War, Café Nihilismus – its very title pointing to a doubting of established cultural values – suggests a larger, questioning relationship between then and now. While absent of the nostalgia trappings of our day, it is a disquisition on our moment via a past that, from certain vantages, looks uncannily like it.

Eva Grubinger (*1970 Salzburg) lives and works in Berlin. Her works are exhibited in numerous national and international solo and group exhibitions.

Solo exhibitions (selection): Belvedere (2012), Kerstin Engholm Galerie (2011), ZKM - Museum für Neue Kunst (2011), Landesgalerie Oberösterreich (2011), Museum der Moderne Salzburg (2009), Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt (2007), Berlinische Galerie (2004), BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art (2003), KIASMA Museum of Contemporary Art (2001), IASPIS Galleriet (2000).

Group exhibitions (selection): Witte de With (2014), Galeria Vermelho (2013), Museum of Contemporary Art Krakow (2013), 21er Haus (2012), 4th Marrakech Biennale (2012), Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt (2011).

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