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**'It was a white and pretty hand / Who made this blackness for us'¹:
The Politics of Gender and Culture in Early Nineteenth Century French
Portraiture²**

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Abstract

The 'exotic' carries with it implications of foreignness, curiosity, and allure. In visual art, the artist establishes the 'exotic' female sitter as a passive object of the active male gaze. How is this situation affected when a European Christian woman artist represents an 'exotic' sitter, such as a semi-nude Black woman or a Persian Muslim male dignitary, for a public audience? Can we even label these sitters as 'exotic'? This paper will address those questions by examining Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait of a Negress* (1800) and Césarine-Henriette-Flore Davin-Mirvault's *Portrait of Askar Khan Afshar, Ambassador from Persia* (1808).

Introduction

Exoticism in nineteenth-century French art often conjures mental images of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's harem scenes or Jean-Léon Gérôme's depictions of female slave markets. These paintings depict life in non-Western lands, especially in European colonies and the Ottoman Empire, as imagined or observed by male European artists. Typically painted by men for men, such scenes often convey women, and sometimes boys, as sexual objects. However, the opening of the biennial Paris Salon to artists outside the Académie Royale in 1791 increased the number of professional women artists seeking serious commissions. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, two women from the school of Jacques-Louis David painted the likenesses of at least three individuals hailing from cultures outside Western Europe. This paper will demonstrate the ambiguity in the degrees to which these artists staged

their sitters as 'exotic' through analyses of the gaze, the influence of prints, and the manner in which cultural 'outsiders' were treated in early nineteenth-century France.

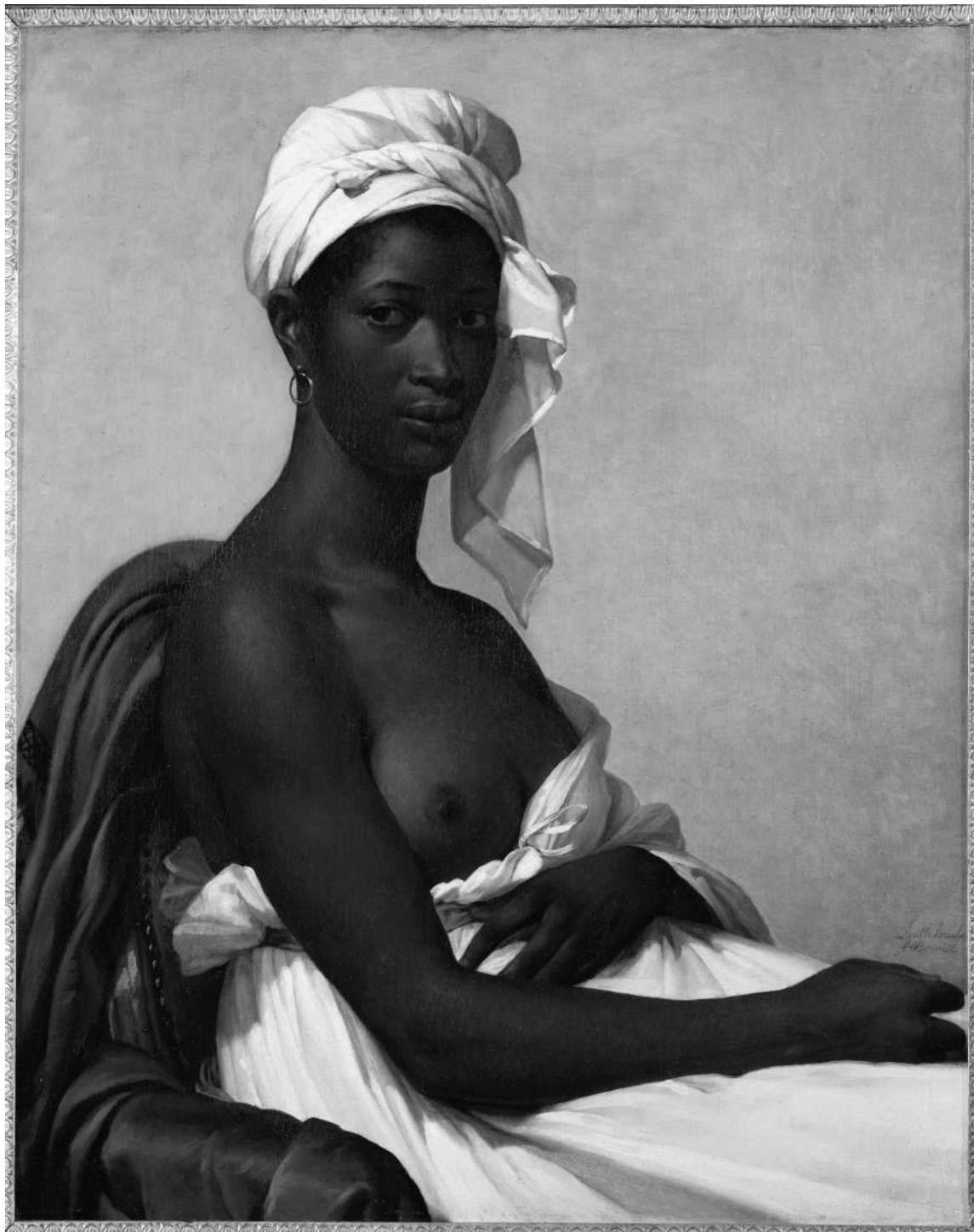


Fig 1: Marie-Guillemine Benoist, *Portrait of a Negress*, 1800, oil on canvas, 81 x 65cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

Marie- Guillemine Benoist, née Leroulx de la Ville, (1768-1826) and Césarine-Henriette-Flore Davin-Mirvault (1773-1844) previously received training from multiple teachers, such as Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and Jean-Baptiste-Jacques Augustin, respectively, who excelled in diverse styles, but Benoist's and Davin-Mirvault's Neoclassical paintings have received the most acclaim and scholarly attention. Neoclassicism, with its emphasis on invisible brushstrokes and stoic subject matter, is the style in which Benoist painted her *Portrait of a Negress* (1800) (Fig 1) and in which Davin-Mirvault painted her *Portrait of Askar-Khan Afshar, Ambassador from Persia* (1808) (Fig 2). In the production of each portrait, a woman scrutinised her non-Western sitter to create an accurate likeness, complicating the dynamics of agency, traditionally held by white male portraitists over their female sitters of any race. The title of this paper derives from a hostile critic of Benoist's portrait who shared a widespread opinion that art was produced strictly for the benefit of the public, thus removing agency from *all* artists and putting women artists at an additional disadvantage. This paper will examine how the featured artists and sitters complicated the white male-dominated power relationships of early nineteenth century France.



Fig 2: Césarine-Henriette-Flore Davin-Mirvault, *Askar Khan Afshar, Ambassador from Persia*, 1808, oil on canvas, 170 x 132cm. Musée national des châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles, Photo Credit: Gianni Dagli Orti / Art Resource, NY

Defining ‘exotic’ and considering the place of women artists

The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the origin of ‘exotic’ to a Graeco-Latin root meaning ‘foreign’. Listed historical examples of the uses of the word do not date before the late nineteenth century, when European empire building was reaching its zenith.³ In the art historical context, ‘exotic’ usually refers to real or imagined scenes of Persia, the Ottoman Empire, or North Africa (the ‘Orient’ in nineteenth century parlance) or individuals who hailed from those regions.⁴ This connotation places Davin-Mirvault’s *Portrait of Askar-Khan Afshar* (Fig 2) within the theme of the ‘exotic’. Benoist’s sitter (Fig 1) was born in either Guadeloupe or Guyana, both French colonies in the Caribbean

Sea.⁵ However, her bared breast and ‘turban’ place the portrait in a category called ‘Moorish erotica’, which art historian Lisa Farrington defines as ‘a popular genre in [nineteenth century] European painting that depicted Africans in Arabic costume and embodied both the erotic and the exotic elements common to academic French painting of the period’.⁶ In other words, despite the ethnicity of Benoist’s model, sartorial presentation gives her the appearance of a woman from the ‘Orient’. Given the ‘Oriental’ context of both paintings, the art historical denotation of ‘exotic’ may be applied to the individuals who sat for Benoist and Davin-Mirvault. The roles of allure and the gaze, on the other hand, are problematic. When subject matter involves one or more individuals subject to sexual objectification, ‘exotic’ implies a sense of allure, which, in turn, includes the role of the gaze, a concept that, according to film theorist Laura Mulvey, places agency with white male spectators.⁷ Since the 1970s, scholars have expanded upon this paradigm to consider the places of women artists and non-white sitters. This paper will engage with these interpretations to examine the impacts of artists and sitters who disrupt the white, male-dominated dynamics of the gaze.

In France during the ‘long nineteenth century’, women artists, despite their growing numbers in the art world, had to navigate strict conventions of decorum to ensure their success.⁸ Excessive modesty condemned many to brief careers and incomplete paper trails for today’s scholars. Lax modesty, on the other hand, brought women’s virtue into question, damaging their reputations and, thus, their careers. The constant alertness and judgment calls required of maintaining ‘ideal’ reputations could explain the

ambiguity that lies within Benoist's and Davin-Mirvault's portraits. Meeting normative expectations was especially challenging for women who produced subject matter considered rare for their sex.

Black models, who appeared sporadically in Western portraiture in the decades preceding and following *Portrait of a Negress*, (Fig 1) were typically depicted as infantilised status symbols for their white masters, as in Joseph Wright of Derby's *Conversation between Two Girls* (1770), or as awkwardly dressed imitators of white manners, as in American portraitist Charles Willson Peale's *Portrait of Yarrow Mamout* (1819). Such imagery respectively casts Black models as 'naturally' dependent on or inferior to white Europeans and Americans, a notion that would persist after the abolition of slavery in Europe and the United States. In France, Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson's *Portrait of Citizen Jean-Baptiste Belley, Ex-Representative of the Colonies* (1797) was among the few portraits to depict a Black man in an arguably positive manner.⁹ The sitter, a former Senegalese slave who rose to political power to advocate the abolition of slavery, stands beside a portrait bust of the white abolitionist Guillaume-Thomas Raynal and directs his gaze skyward in the manner of the enlightened ruler. Art historian Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, arguing largely in favour of respectability in this portrait, acknowledges that racist spectators could have relied on physiognomic comparisons between the right angle formed by Raynal's forehead and the relatively acute angle formed by Belley's to 'conclude that Belley was racially and intellectually inferior' to his white counterpart.¹⁰ She also notes the possible allusion to 'black [*sic*] sexual prowess'

in the prominence of Belley's genitals, whose contours, visible beneath his tight trousers, are emphasised by the sitter's curved right hand.¹¹ Girodet's portrait, unique for its time and exhibited two years before Benoist's portrait, would have been fresh in the memories of astute Salon attendees and critics. While Benoist's sitter occupies a lower social status than that of Belley, similar ambiguities pertaining to dignity, physiognomy, and sexual objectification surface in the later portrait.

Less common than depictions of Black sitters in the first decade of the nineteenth century were those of 'Oriental'—primarily Persian, Arabic, and Turkish—sitters. In fact, Davin-Mirvault's portraits of ambassadors from Persia and the Ottoman Empire might be among the earliest known representations of 'Oriental' dignitaries by a French artist, male or female.¹² She is known to have painted three such portraits, one of the Ottoman ambassador (1799) and two of Askar-Khan (1808 and 1810-1814). Although erotically themed paintings of objectified women became the better-known representations of the 'Orient', Davin-Mirvault's portraits disrupt such narratives by providing evidence of high-ranking men who accepted the artistic scrutiny of a woman portraitist. This reversal of traditional roles provides scholars with a more complex reading of history.

Portrait of the artist as Other

Benoist (then Leroulx de la Ville) was born into an upper middle-class family in 1768. During her adolescence and early adulthood, the financial bankruptcy of the national government and subsequent revolution left France with a weak economy and many bourgeois families unable to maintain their formerly comfortable standard of living. This new period of economic struggle forced many families, including the Leroulx de la Villes, to encourage their daughters to seek respectable employment in order to earn their dowries.¹³ During the beginning of the Terror phase of the French Revolution in 1793, in which mere suspicion of royalist activity was grounds for execution, Leroulx de la Ville married the royalist lawyer Comte Pierre-Vincent Benoist, who had aided the royal family in their attempted escape from France two years earlier. The radical politics of the time forced the Benoists into hiding until moderate revolutionaries overthrew the government in 1794.¹⁴

For much of her marriage, while continuing to work as a professional artist, the now Comtesse Benoist used her contacts in the art world—artists and patrons alike—to assist her husband's rise in status during the Consulate, First Empire, and Bourbon Restoration. In 1814, the newly ascended Louis XVIII appointed her husband to the position of State Counsellor, a position that provided him with a substantial income.¹⁵ The norms of the time, which frowned upon wealthy women holding paid employment in the public sphere, dictated that Comtesse Benoist retire.¹⁶ While we cannot determine the artist's political sympathies by considering those of her husband, we can conclude

that her role in his rise in status necessitated her conformity to contemporary political conventions, which would foreclose any attempts to effect social change.

Portrait of a Negress (Fig 1) features an anonymous Black woman sitting in a chair draped with expensive blue fabric. The blank dull yellow background emphasises the contrast in tones between the white fabric and woman's dark skin. The 'tail' of her head covering hangs to the left side of the sitter's face, reinforcing the shadow from which only the white of her left eye escapes. She wears a white classical dress or tunic that exposes her right breast. A red sash circles the garment just below the breast to conform to the Empire style that had re-entered popular fashion in the post-Terror 1790s. This accessory, as well as the position of the drapery that exposes the sitter's right breast, recalls Antoine-Jean Gros's depiction of the Liberty allegory (1795). However, as will be demonstrated, it is unlikely that this woman symbolizes liberty or emancipation.

While the sitter might initially appear to exchange the audience's gaze, she slightly averts her eyes in a gesture of 'ocular submission', or a compliance to the will of the artist as conveyed through the model's eyes, suggesting that her sitting for the portrait is not an act of free will.¹⁷ Her left forearm, draped almost to her wrist, rests on her abdomen, and her left hand seems to point to the bend between her right forearm and bicep, whose sculpted appearance might be the result of manual labour as a slave. Her right forearm, on the other hand, ends in a slightly discoloured (scarred?) wrist and a

hand that, as first noted by art historian Helen Weston, appears more like a 'cloven hoof', as if the appendage had been mutilated in an accident or as punishment for an infraction on the plantation.¹⁸ Even if this disturbing appearance is merely the effect of the position of the sitter's hand, it suggests a sense of perceived racial hierarchy that pervaded white society in early nineteenth-century France, regardless of individual political beliefs.¹⁹ In total, with its classical allusions that bear commonalities to progressive political allegories, an earlier self-portrait of the artist and attributes of the body that suggest a subaltern rank in society, Benoist's portrait brings together contradictions that, even when we consider the historical context in which she painted it, creates a problematic situation.

Benoist painted *Portrait of a Negress* during a time when the transatlantic slave trade was still thriving. Although France had abolished slavery in the colonies in 1794, Napoleon Bonaparte, who became First Consul in 1799, was already working to revive the institution in 1800 and would succeed in doing so in 1802.²⁰ Available documents show that Benoist never travelled beyond Paris and never witnessed the conditions slaves were forced to endure in French and other European colonies. Benoist's lack of travel informs us that her sitter was brought to Paris. Evidence supports the possibility that the model lived in the home of the artist's brother-in-law Benoist-Cavy, who had travelled to the French colonies of Guadeloupe and Guyana while serving in the navy.²¹ If this is true, she had to be a paid servant, given the historical context. Nevertheless, according to Griselda Pollock, portraits of 'free' Black servants were used as status

symbols for wealthy and haut bourgeois families at this time.²² Furthermore, the sitter's exact job title, like her name, remains unknown, further robbing her of her individuality and reminding the audience that the abolition of slavery did not erase any lingering prejudices created by white privilege.

Fig. 3. Marie-Guillemine Leroux de la Ville, [Self-Portrait Painting David's Belisarius](#), 1786, oil on canvas. Private collection²³

The subtext of the portrait grows confusing when we consider two contradictory elements within the picture plane. As noted above, Benoist's sitter wears a classical garment that bears resemblance to one worn in an early self-portrait of the artist (**Fig. 3**) painted during her initial years studying with David, seven years before her marriage. Leroux de la Ville exposes her right shoulder and only the top portion of her breast, keeping her nipple covered. As an unmarried woman with no children, she would have damaged her reputation by exposing her entire breast. Nevertheless, she invites the male gaze with her long flowing hair, blushing cheeks, and slight smile. Fourteen years later, the Black woman who sat for Benoist was not so obviously a willing participant in the active male spectator/passive female sitter binary. The model's facial expression is one of discomfort, if not fear. More disturbingly, while the artist's self-portrait features a confident young woman holding a brush in her dominant hand and her palette and additional brushes in the other, her sitter holds nothing. In fact, her 'cloven' right hand would prevent her from undertaking such a project, thus leaving her without power. Where a brush or writing implement would be is instead the artist's signature, as if to compensate for the pen her sitter would hold if she were white and socio-economically privileged. However, as a female servant, she was likely illiterate, incapable of writing

even her own name. When taken together, these elements suggest that this portrait is an antithesis of the artist, but is it a record of empathy or elitism?

If the artist has left a part of herself in this portrait, the issue of postcolonial shame could be an issue. While France did not intend to relinquish its colonies in 1800, it existed in a brief post-slavery era. Most of the white population in France believed in a racial hierarchy, but racism does not necessarily equate with support for slavery. Furthermore, no documentation exists to prove or disprove where Benoist stood on the issue. If the painting is an antithesis of herself, could she have embedded her own sense of shame within the picture plane? Could this antithesis be an acknowledgement of complicity in the brutal institution of slavery and the consequences of the gaze that accompany it?

Postcolonial scholar Timothy Bewes informs us that '[a]utobiographical writing ... is almost inevitably a shameful exercise, since in understanding it we cast the ontological gaze of the other upon ourselves'.²⁴ We can easily change 'writing' to 'painting' to consider the portrait as an exercise in self-reflection. Benoist, an upwardly mobile member of an extended family who depended on the services of a disempowered woman, could have realized the dependence she and other privileged whites had on the labour of the colonised and formerly enslaved. Having done nothing (or, as a woman, being unable to do anything) to change her sitter's situation, she could have created her sitter's likeness in her own image as an unconscious attempt to empathise.

Additionally, we must consider the location of the artistic signature. Its position directly above the sitter's mutilated hand, in the place of writing or painting implements in portraits of white subjects, calls to mind Bewes's rephrasing of a quote by philosopher Gilles Deleuze: 'The ability to write — is there any better reason to feel ashamed'?²⁵ The sitter's lot in life, in addition to her hand (whether a fact of reality or merely an effect limited to the picture plane), could have triggered a sense of shame in the literate artist. Perhaps the location of her signature is a form of compensation for her model's illiteracy. In sum, the portrait can be read as bearing evidence of white shame; however, the concept of the objectified Black female body must also be considered.

As an educated and well-connected woman with access to books and prints, Benoist might have been aware of the centuries-old practice of treating the Black female body as a sexual object to be studied, exhibited, and, even more tragically, violated. Ten years after Benoist completed her painting, Scottish physician Alexander Dunlop took twenty year-old Sara Baartman of Cape Town, South Africa (willingly, according to the historical record) to the United Kingdom, where she was exhibited as the 'Hottentot Venus' for four years. Her bodily proportions, namely her wide hips, prominent buttocks and supposedly elongated genitalia set her apart from the 'standard' proportions of white European women.²⁶

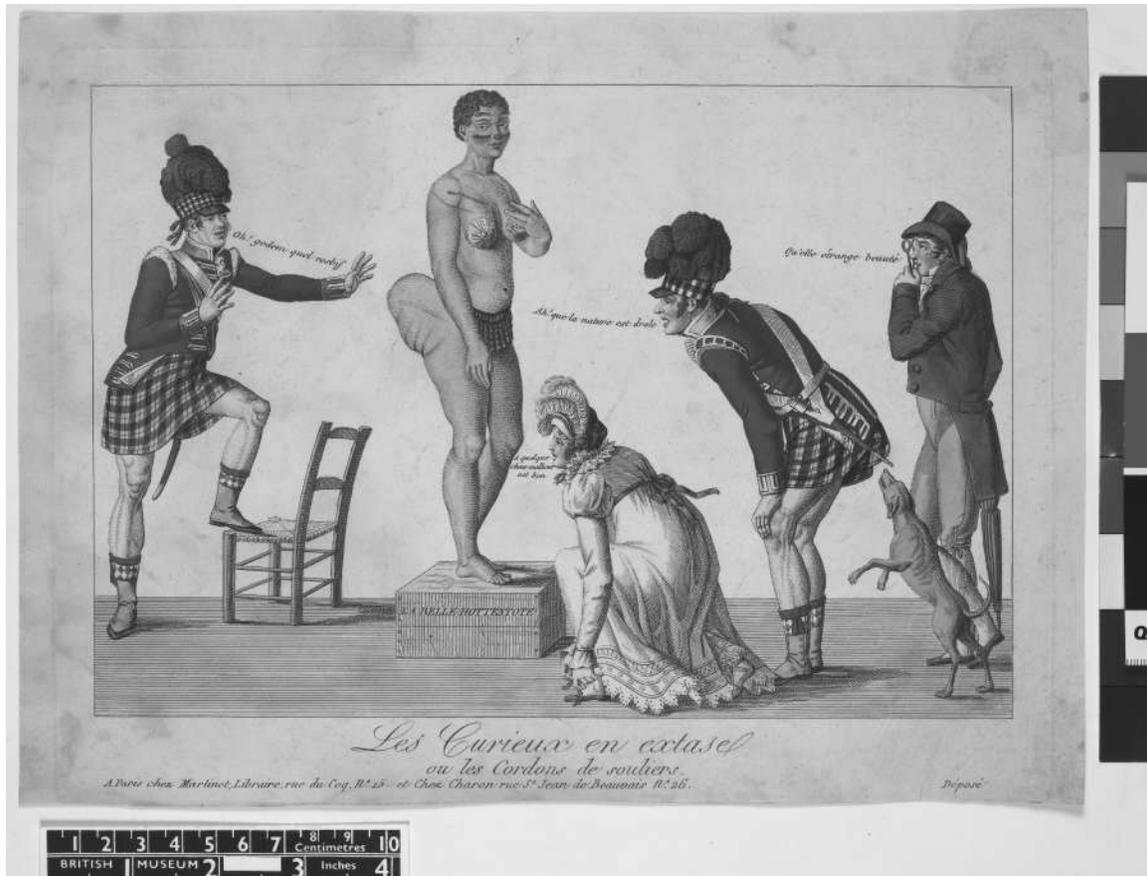


Fig. 4: Louis François Charon, *The Curious in Ecstasy or Shoelaces*, 1815, hand-coloured etching, 222 x 295mm. British Museum, London, © The Trustees of the British Museum / Art Resource, NY

Caricatures by French and English artists exaggerate Baartman's proportions, illuminating her status as 'other'. Louis François Charon's etching *The Curious in Ecstasy or Shoelaces* (1814-1815) (Fig. 4) depicts Baartman, posed like a classical Venus sculpture, on a pedestal engraved with 'THE BEAUTIFUL HOTTENTOT', a sarcastic reference to her appearance.²⁷ She is surrounded by three men and one woman, each of whom utter lewd comments ranging from 'Oh, goddamn, what roast beef!' to 'Ah, how amusing nature is!' the latter of which is uttered by a soldier whose gaze is directed at her genitalia.²⁸ In other words, Charon reduces Baartman to a piece of meat to be consumed and a joke that nature has played for the amusement of

European audiences. The possible sexual nature of the first comment, and the reference to genitalia in the second, point to sexual curiosity masquerading as scientific interest, whether from actual spectators or the caricaturist.

Available primary sources inform us that Baartman's actual treatment differed little from Charon's print. Her 'keeper' dressed her in 'beads and feathers' and a tight flesh-toned dress.²⁹ In addition to making her proportions accessible to the public, her attire emphasised her otherness and incited the cruel curiosity of the men and women who paid to see her exhibited. Conversely, Benoist's sitter appears less othered with her lean body and classical drapery. While the presentation of Benoist's model would invite libellous reactions, the insults she would receive would be indirect, aimed at her portrait, rather than directly at her.

Although Benoist does not exaggerate her sitter's racial and cultural difference, she deploys naturalistic formal elements and pseudoscience to emphasise racial difference. Art historian James Smalls notes that, during Benoist's lifetime, Europe had begun to adopt the concept of race as an anthropological and sociological category, differentiating individuals by such attributes as the colour of their skin and the sizes of their facial features.³⁰ The late eighteenth century witnessed the revival of physiognomy, an ancient pseudoscience that judges individuals' temperaments by their facial proportions that was used to validate theories of racial hierarchies. During this time, philosopher Johann Kaspar Lavater wrote an essay about determining character

by analysing features such as the mouth and nose.³¹ Benoist consistently juxtaposes her sitter's dark skin with the lighter values of her clothing or the background.³² She depicts the model's face at a three-quarter angle, preventing the spectator from seeing the angle of the woman's forehead, an important factor taken into account in earlier physiognomic arguments. However, Benoist's source of light allows the spectator to see the shapes of her sitter's nose and mouth, both of which complement the forehead to illuminate racial difference and legitimise racist theories.

Fig. 5: *Portrait of a Negress* can be seen roughly centrally positioned in the middle row on the left hand wall of G. Devisme, after a drawing by Antoine-Maxime Monsaldy, *Vue des ouvrages de peinture des artistes vivans, exposés au museum central des Arts en l'an VIII de la République française*, 1800, [dimensions not available]. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie (Department of Prints and Photographs), Paris. Image is in the public domain.³³

The emphasis on the sitter's racial difference from the average French citizen played a significant role when the artist exhibited her painting in the Paris Salon of 1800. As an event that was free of charge and open to the public, the Salon placed its artworks under the scrutiny of all who attended, from trained critics to the popular classes. *Portrait of a Negress*, as we can see in the official engraving of the Salon (Fig. 5), hung just above the bottom row, allowing the audience to view it easily and analyse the sitter's otherness. At least one critic writing in *The New Harlequin and His Friend Gilles at the Natural History Museum* hailed the artist's physical beauty but attacked her for portraying 'horror':³⁴

GILLES: My friend, I do not want to stay here any longer; I have seen the devil.
ARLEQUIN: Where?
GILLES: Look, *Portrait of a Negress* by a woman.
ARLEQUIN: *To the tune of 'Recitative of Leonidas'*.

Who can one trust in life,
After such a horror!
It was a white and pretty hand
Who made this blackness for us.³⁵

This extract, with its equation of dark skin with ugliness and evil contrasted with the equation of white skin with beauty and goodness, serves as evidence of racism at the beginning of the century. Interestingly, the title of the critique uses the French word *muséum* (natural history museum), as opposed to *musée* (art museum). The former term suggests the presence of non-human specimens on display, as non-white humans were treated when brought to Europe as curiosities and where composite sculptures of Africans were temporarily housed later in the century.³⁶ Despite growing opposition to slavery among those who considered themselves enlightened, few believed that individuals of African origin deserved equal rights with white Frenchmen.³⁷ In fact, many believed racial difference ‘threaten[ed] the stability and ideality of the (white) male body’. However, the danger posed by the Black female body increased its allure, eliciting its hypersexualisation.³⁸

Benoist conveys a sense of hypersexualisation by deploying traditional methods objectifying her model relative to the male gaze, especially in her submissive facial expression and her physical availability (i.e., alone in the picture plane). Additionally, the position of her left hand accentuates her exposed breast, working in conjunction with the breast’s location just to the left of the vertical axis to establish it as a focal point. Moreover, expensive blue fabric touches the model’s back and drapes the back of the

chair in which she sits, adding a hint of exoticism and conveying a soft visual texture that invites touch. Nevertheless, the question of the artist's gaze remains.

In the years following 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Mulvey revisited her argument to consider the role of the female gaze, again concluding that agency is male. The female viewer, whose desires are absent from the screen, must identify either with the active gaze of the male protagonist or with the female object of his gaze, never fully embodying either role.³⁹ Focusing on the object of the male gaze in her analysis of Manet's *Olympia* (1863), art historian Griselda Pollock interprets the title sitter's black servant as a 'resistance' of racist tropes, using the subtle pinks and blues in her white attire as disruptions of complete tonal contrast with her skin.⁴⁰ Finally, art historian Mary Roberts discusses the 'ethnographic' gaze, in which British female diarists touring the 'Orient' reframed the harems they visited as equivalents of the European upper middle-class domestic sphere, thereby endowing the often objectified odalisques with a sense of agency.⁴¹ These approaches prompt new debates regarding agency between Benoist and her model.

As an upwardly mobile individual with powerful connections, Benoist was likely an agent of the white male gaze, placing her in Mulvey's gender-disidentified realm. Could this powerlessness have provoked an ethnographic gaze of rapport with her sitter? While the parallels between this portrait and the earlier self-portrait could suggest identification, the lack of spectral colours in the sitter's garments form a stark 'othering'

contrast with her skin, overpowering the thin red sash that encircles her torso. On the other hand, the mustard-toned background also borders her bare skin, diminishing the 'othering' effect of the white. In sum, the question of the ethnographic gaze in *Portrait of a Negress* has no definitive answer.

Orientalism and the woman painter

Seven years after the Salon of 1800, France entered its fourth year as an empire under Napoleon's leadership. As such, it made enemies, sought new alliances, and brokered international negotiations. Its relationship with the Persian Empire began in the latter two capacities. In May of 1807, the Finkstein Treaty declared Georgia as Persian territory and ordered Russia to evacuate the region. France, as a signatory of the treaty, promised to 'spare no effort' in expelling Russian forces and 'guarantee[ing] the existing territory of Persia'. Ultimately, Napoleon saw Persia as a means to an end in his own ambition to conquer British-held India, but from 1807 to 1810, the Persian and French empires appeared to enjoy a civil diplomatic relationship.⁴² During this time, Davin-Mirvault painted her portrait of Askar-Khan Afshar (Fig 2), whom Fath 'Ali Shah had appointed as ambassador, and exhibited it in the Salon of 1810.

On 20 July 1808, Askar-Khan arrived in Paris to engage in peace talks with Russia. Within two weeks, he had captured the attention of the major newspaper *The Newspaper of the Empire*, which praised him for his manners and acquiescence to the curiosity of Parisian high society.⁴³ In an ethnocentric gesture, the newspaper

'complimented' Askar-Khan and his entourage as 'Frenchmen of Asia', implying superiority in etiquette in French-born individuals.⁴⁴ Before the end of the summer, Parisian social and political elites had 'adopted' the ambassador. Like his Christian European counterparts, Askar-Khan 'vied for success ... with the women' of elite circles. His popularity among both women and politicians was higher than that of the Turkish ambassador because of the former's ability to assimilate with French conventions more easily.⁴⁵ This factor will be significant in the analysis of Davin-Mirvault's portrait.

Less is known about Davin-Mirvault than is known about Benoist, but enough information exists to piece together a general biography. Throughout her life, Davin-Mirvault occupied various socioeconomic levels. She was born into a family with connections to minor aristocracy, including godparents who were a count and a marquise. As an adult, she surrounded herself with mostly lesser-known, but well connected, figures from the worlds of art and politics, connections that contributed to her painting the portraits of political figures.⁴⁶ Like Benoist, Davin-Mirvault relied on painting as a source of income. Married to an '*inspecteur à Parme*' (a diplomat or attaché), Davin-Mirvault continued to exhibit her work in the Salon until 1822. After her husband died two years later, she opened an art school for women, which she operated until her death in 1844. Although the school was 'well-attended', and although high-ranking government figures numbered among her clientele, she died in poverty.⁴⁷ As with Benoist, nothing is known of Davin-Mirvault's political sympathies. However, for a woman making a living in a male-dominated field that established rigid standards for its

female members, political conformity within the confines of 'feminine' decency was the wise approach when depicting public figures. As will be demonstrated, Davin-Mirvault's portrait of the Persian ambassador contains enough ambiguity to successfully meet this expectation.

Unlike most Western portraits, which typically feature their subjects in full, half or three-quarter length, Davin-Mirvault's portrait of Askar-Khan depicts him in a kneeling position as he holds a staff in his right hand and prayer beads, commonly used by devout Muslims, in his left. Atop the ambassador's head sits a white printed turban, whose floral bands symbolize Paradise, as described in the *Qur'an*.⁴⁸ Beside him, to the spectator's right, is a small silver jar whose contents are hidden to the audience. Such vessels, also present in official portraits of Persian shahs (kings), likely signify political or religious import. Although these elements of Islam and Islamic rule might initially appear to clash with the culture of Roman Catholic France, the level of fascination that the Parisian people held for Askar-Khan would have temporarily 'muted' any perceived 'threat' to French culture, casting Islam as a novelty.⁴⁹

From the ambassador's heavily bearded face, he exchanges the spectator's gaze with an expression of serious contemplation. The artist, initially trained as a miniaturist, expertly captures the details and various textures of her sitter's clothing, as well as the glossy texture of his polished fingernails. Behind the ambassador, a scroll with his name sits atop a stack of books, whose titles are indiscernible. If anything, they denote

the education of the sitter and his willingness to read texts in the bound form of the West. As for the interior design, an ornate wall-to-wall Persian rug extends from the foreground to the classical columns from which green drapes hang to separate the interior space from the desert in the distance. Such an environment is not naturally occurring to France. If Davin-Mirvault never travelled beyond Paris, how and why did she create this setting for this portrait?



Fig. 6: Césarine-Henriette-Flore Davin-Mirvault, *Portrait of François-Joseph Lefebvre, Duc de Danzig, Marshal*, 1807, oil on canvas, 215 x 140 cm. Musée national des châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles, Photo Credit: Gianni Dagli Orti / Art Resource, NY

By the time Askar-Khan sat for Davin-Mirvault, she had already painted the portraits of at least two powerful men. Her *Portrait of François-Joseph Lefebvre, Duc of Danzig, Marshal* (1807) (Fig. 6) features a decorated officer in Napoleon's army who received his

aristocratic title for his service to the Empire. Again, the artist's eye for detail emerges in the sitter's ornately brocaded coat and cape. Although his tight uniform, hatless head and clean-shaven face would initially reduce his visual weight relative to Askar-Khan's heavily concealed body, the marshal's upper body equalises both men's sense of presence. Whereas the ambassador kneels amidst an 'exotic' setting, Lefebvre stands in a relatively classical setting, with its tiled floor and spartan background consisting only of a pedestal on which his plumed hat rests. Similar to Askar-Khan, Lefebvre holds a baton, signifying his rank, at an angle in his right hand, and carries a sword at his left side. Although his eyes do not meet those of the spectator, his leftward gaze, contrapposto pose and left hand grasping the hilt of his sword suggest an air of forward-thinking self-confidence, capturing France's imperial ambitions of the time. In total, the artist depicts the ability of culture to suggest the embodiment of power and the commanding of attention.

In 1799, Davin-Mirvault painted a portrait (untraced) of the Ottoman ambassador to France, a portrait which Napoleon's brother Lucien purchased in the early nineteenth century.⁵⁰ Art historian Amy Fine explains that the Ottoman and Persian ambassadors' portraits 'can be seen as part of a long tradition of French curiosity about the Orient'.⁵¹ Despite cultural differences between the Persians and Ottoman Turks, this portrait could, if found, shed light on the portrayal of men of the 'Orient' in early nineteenth-century French portraiture. For example, it could answer questions about Askar-Khan's kneeling position and his placement in an 'exotic' setting. Is this a gesture of respect,

othering, or empiricism? If it is the last option, how do we explain the setting? Perhaps we need to look beyond France for an explanation.

Fig. 7: Mirza Baba, [*Portrait of Fath 'Ali Shah, King of Persia*](#), 1797, oil on canvas, 188 x 107cm. British Library, London⁵²

Persian portraitist Mirza Baba's *Portrait of Fath 'Ali Shah, King of Persia* (1797) (Fig. 7), which depicts the man who appointed Askar-Khan to his position, bears a striking resemblance to Davin-Mirvault's portrait. Like Lefebvre, the Shah exudes an air of seriousness and confidence without exchanging the spectator's gaze. His erect posture and stern countenance inform the audience that this is a man of power. Like Askar-Khan, he kneels on an ornate rug, holds a staff, and sits in a traditional Persian setting, complete with a capped bottle just to the side of the sitter and drawn curtain hanging in the background. Although this is an oil painting, many copies were sent to 'foreign leaders', including Napoleon, as propaganda tools, due to their indigenous purpose of veneration.⁵³ As a student of David, and as a friend and relative of several government figures, Davin-Mirvault had access to the imperial court and likely saw such portraiture. Additionally, the ubiquity of print culture provided local artists access to artworks from around the world. Given this context, it is reasonable to deduce that Davin-Mirvault's portrait aims to blend Neoclassical naturalism and stoicism with Persian ornamentation within the picture plane. Nevertheless, while the choice of setting is likely innocuous, even respectful, the question of exoticism remains.

According to Edward Said, Europeans largely 'invented' the concept of the Orient, which 'had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings [and] haunting memories and landscapes'.⁵⁴ Napoleon's fascination with the region began between 1795 and 1799, while he was still a rising star in the French military.⁵⁵ The popularity that Askar-Khan gained among French elites demonstrates that Napoleon was not alone in his interest. However, the ambassador's willingness to adopt French customs played a role in his acceptance and rise to celebrity status. Despite this assimilation, Davin-Mirvault placed him in a Persian setting and portrayed him in traditional Persian attire with distinct references to the Islamic faith. Postcolonial scholar Sandra Ponzanesi writes that Orientalism in the visual arts illuminates 'local costume [and] settings of pictorial fascination'. Such imagery, she continues, usually carries 'an explicit erotic charge'.⁵⁶ Clearly, Davin-Mirvault's portrait suggests the first two components, but did the Persian ambassador convey this 'erotic charge'?

As traditional objects of the gaze, female sitters are usually associated with sexual attention. Ponzanesi and critical theorist Clarisse Zimra discuss both versions of Eugène Delacroix's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* (1834 and 1849), which depict an Algerian harem that he visited after much bargaining with the man of the house. Both scholars describe the original painting as an appeal to the male gaze. The clearly focused women, emphasised with abundant ambient light, pose provocatively in the foreground of the painting. This heightens their availability to the (male) European audience which casts the '[f]orbidden gaze'.⁵⁷ By contrast, Delacroix's second

rendering of the same scene, approximately 100 square centimetres smaller than the original, presents a less focused and darker setting that sets the women farther away from the spectator. In total, these aspects make the women less accessible. What neither scholar discusses is the soft visual texture, once again inviting touch, that appears in both paintings yet is clearer in the earlier version. While Ponzanesi describes the women in the more recent painting as disembodied, Zimra casts their depiction as a more sympathetic rendering, representing the women's near lifetime of imprisonment.⁵⁸ Both agree, however, that the gaze of the male European spectator is a 'stolen' one.⁵⁹ In other words, the rightful gaze belonged only to the women's husband. The earlier painting provides physical accessibility, while its later counterpart provides psychological accessibility. In the tradition of the Western gaze, physical access appeals to the spectator's carnal desires. In contrast, psychological access to the sitter(s) can elicit the spectator's sympathy or empathy, which, in turn, reduces the agency of the gaze. As a result, the spectator is forced to see the Other as more than simply a sexual object. This was likely the impact of Delacroix's second representation of *The Women of Algiers* when it reduced Impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir to tears.⁶⁰

Where does this leave the portrait of Askar-Khan? Upon initial inspection, the ambassador does not appear to suggest the element of eroticism that we find in Delacroix's work. Davin-Mirvault portrays him wearing heavy, layered fabrics that leave little skin exposed and, unlike the form-fitting attire of Fath 'Ali Shah, provides the

audience with little more than incomplete contour lines of the ambassador's arms and legs. He is surrounded by symbols of knowledge, religion, and power, elements that complement his serious countenance. However, as previously noted, he quickly gained a reputation as a 'ladies' man' after arriving in Paris. In an era in which most French men had clean-shaven faces, French women intrigued by the 'exotic' might have found a full beard, like the one on the ambassador, attractive.⁶¹ Power, a quality he possessed as the Shah's proxy, would have attracted women seeking wealth or fame. The attribution of his staff and sword as phallic symbols might seem banal. However, the association between power and phallic symbols, per the psychoanalytic ahistoricity of the unconscious, should not be overlooked. Moreover, his left thumb and forefinger, are situated near his groin and positioned in manner that would accommodate a cylindrical object. Such allusions to male sexuality could have ruined Davin-Mirvault's reputation, but the light values and similar colouring of Askar-Khan's hand and clothing render the gesture subtle. Nevertheless, the ambassador's physical position in the foreground, like that of the women in the original representation of Delacroix's painting, allowed the audience to closely scrutinise these elements that could have expressed a sense of allure. However, available primary sources provide no commentary —positive or negative—regarding contemporary reception of the portrait.⁶²

If this dearth of literature marks an evasion of controversy, could feminisation of the sitter have played a role? Said argues that Orientalism renders the East 'passive [and] feminine' through dependence on the West, relevantly Persia's dependence on France

during treaty negotiations.⁶³ Perceived feminisation of Askar-Khan would have complicated the role of agency between artist and sitter, especially if she deployed an ethnographic gaze. Art historian Hollis Clayson's analysis of Henri Regnault's *Hassan and Namouna* (1870) suggests a sense of rapport between the European artist and an 'Oriental' subject, drawing parallels in body language between the 'feminine' passivity of the male sitter and an obviously 'bored' Regnault captured in a sketch produced the same year.⁶⁴ Likewise, if Davin-Mirvault's oeuvre serves as an example, she had access to dignitaries within and outside of French culture, amassing knowledge available to a small percentage of the Parisian population and even a smaller percentage of women. Arguably, such experience could have triggered a degree of identification with her high-ranking Persian sitter. If Hassan gains agency through the ethnographic gaze of a male European artist, Askar-Khan could lose agency through a woman artist's ethnographic gaze. Moreover, his accessibility to the spectator could equate him with the 'available' female object of the male gaze.

While Said refers to Orientalism as an 'exclusively male' domain in which male artists portray women as objects of their sexual fantasies, his contextual evidence hails from the late nineteenth century.⁶⁵ In 1808, however, Orientalism was still in its nascent stages⁶⁶ and had not yet entrenched itself in French visual culture. Therefore, it is questionable whether, when Davin-Mirvault painted her portrait, Orientalism had already begun appealing exclusively to heteronormative male desires. It would be another six years before Ingres would exhibit his *Grande Odalisque* at the Salon, thus setting the

stage for Said's description of Orientalism. The Salon of 1814 also included Davin-Mirvault's second portrait of Askar-Khan (untraced), who, by that time, had lost his post due to the failure of the Franco-Persian alliance four years earlier.⁶⁷ Could this change in the political climate have prompted a negative depiction? Until the painting resurfaces, the answer to that question will remain a mystery. In 1808, however, given France's fascination with and curiosity about the 'Orient', an exoticised portrait of a non-Western man created by a woman, especially one with connections in the national government, might not have seemed unusual. Nevertheless, we must examine one more factor before forming a definitive conclusion.

As French fascination with the 'Orient' grew, subject matter hailing from these areas became increasingly sexual. Ingres's *Grande Odalisque* depicts a nude harem member lying on her side with her back largely to the audience, although her leaning on her left forearm and performing a half turn to partially engage the audience's gaze to allow a glimpse of the contour of her right breast. As Davin-Mirvault had done six years earlier and Delacroix would do twenty years later, Ingres deploys a variety of soft visual textures to invite the sense of touch — from the feathers on the odalisque's fan to the silk sheets and drape that adorn her boudoir to the softness of her bare skin. To further entice the (presumably male) spectator, Ingres adds the interplay of curving lines formed primarily by the odalisque's elongated body and the curve of the blue drape. The addition of a pipe at the far right suggests an environment of mind-altering substances mingled with forbidden sexual acts with another man's concubine. Whereas

Davin-Mirvault deploys — at most — a subtle hint of sexuality, Ingres piles layers of sexuality atop one another. In less than one decade, paintings depicting individuals and scenes from the ‘Orient’ took an abrupt turn that would anticipate the slave markets in Gérôme’s art and even more erotic harem scenes by Ingres.

The sexually charged paintings in the years following Davin-Mirvault’s portraits of Askar-Khan reduce the exoticism that her works might have originally conveyed. Of course, the men who succeeded her in the Salon had the gender privilege of adding overtly erotic elements to their Orientalist subject matter. Moreover, after the Franco-Persian alliance crumbled, artistic attention shifted to the Ottoman Empire, whose occupation of Greece had stirred the anger of philhellenic artists and spectators alike.⁶⁸ By 1832, when Greece won independence, Orientalist harem scenes had become commonplace. If, without the contextual analysis, Davin-Mirvault’s portrait appears respectful, the consideration of what followed frames the portrait as a form of veneration.

Conclusion

In the traditional relationship between the sitter and the gaze, the former assumes the less powerful position, in terms of gender, race, class, or any combination of the three. These portrayals emphasise the objectivity of the (traditionally female) sitter and the subjectivity of the (traditionally male) artist and spectator. Artwork depicting (usually female) sitters outside of the Western world often involves the element of exoticism and its implication of the allure of the ‘foreigner’. This is especially true in the art of Ingres

and Delacroix, which represents wives and concubines of other men, in other words, adding the appeal of the forbidden. However, Benoist and Davin-Mirvault complicated this paradigm as white women artists portraying non-Western sitters of both sexes. While we cannot absolve either woman of the racism and ethnocentrism that pervaded all levels of society, we can interpret their portraits as less dehumanizing and more inviting of complex readings than the caricatures and stereotypes that would appear in later years. Benoist and Davin-Mirvault rendered ambiguous the issues of the gaze and the exotic in their art, not because they wanted to revolutionise portraiture but because ambiguity was likely the best option for woman portraitists of non-Western sitters to take when navigating the cultural and political norms of the early nineteenth century.

¹ *Le Nouveau Arlequin et son ami Gilles au Muséum* (1800): 9; Deloynes Collection, vol. 22, no. 623: 327. My translation of

‘C’est une main blanche et jolie
Qui nous a fait cette *noirceur*’.

² This paper began as a final project in Prof. Simona Bertacco's Global Human seminar at the University of Louisville in 2014. I would like to thank Prof. Bertacco for her assistance and recommendations for the initial drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank the editorial staff at re-bus for their expert comments and suggestions during the revision process.

³ ‘Exotic’, *Oxford Dictionaries*,

<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/english/exotic>. Text of the complete note on the etymology of ‘exotic’ reads as follows: ‘Late 16th century: via Latin from Greek *exōtikos* “foreign”, from *exō* “outside”. English exotic is from Greek *exōtikos* “foreign”, from *exō* “outside”. The notion of “foreign origin” gave the word a dimension of glamour, hence phrases such as **exotic dancer**, first introduced in the USA, for a stripper’.

[Original emphasis.]

⁴ Julia Kuehn, ‘Exotic Harem Paintings: Gender, Documentation, and Imagination’, in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* vol. 32, no. 2 (2011): 31.

⁵ Vivian Cameron, ‘Benoist, Mme, French Painter, 1768-1826’, in Delia Gaze (ed.), *Dictionary of Women Artists*, vol. 1 (Fitzroy: London, 1997).

⁶ Lisa E. Farrington, ‘Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude’, in *Woman’s Art Journal* vol. 24, no. 2 (Autumn 2003-Winter 2004): 20. Farrington draws her definition from Jan Neederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

⁷ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Screen* vol. 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 11.

⁸ The 'long nineteenth century' transcends the chronological span from 1800 to 1899 to accommodate major political and industrial innovations. It begins with the onset of the French Revolution (1789), which officially ended feudalism and brought the concept of the modern democratic republic to Europe, and ends with the onset of the First World War (1914), in which modern technology magnified the devastating effects of warfare.

⁹ Analyses of note include Helen Weston, 'Representing the Right to Represent: The Portrait of Citizen Belley, Ex-Representative of the Colonies by A.-L. Girodet', in *Res* vol. 26 (Autumn 1994): 83-99; Tony Halliday, *Facing the Public: Portraiture in the Aftermath of the French Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999): 106-113; and Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 9-64.

¹⁰ Grigsby, *Extremities*: 52.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 55-56.

¹² This assertion is based on my findings thus far.

¹³ Gen Doy, *Women and Visual Culture: Culture in Nineteenth-Century France, 1800-1852* (London: Leicester University Press, 1998): 47.

¹⁴ Helen Weston, "The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover": LaVille-Leroulx's *Portrait d'un négresse* and the Signs of Misrecognition', in Valerie Mainz and Griselda Pollock (eds), *Work and the Image I: Work, Craft and Labour, Visual Representations in Changing Histories* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2000): 56.

¹⁵ State Counsellor is my translation of the official title *Conseiller d'État*.

¹⁶ Weston, "The Cook": 56.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 59.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 60.

¹⁹ James Smalls, 'Slavery is a Woman: "Race", Gender, and Visuality in Marie Benoist's *Portrait of a Negress* (1800)', in *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture* vol. 3, no. 1 (Spring 2004): <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/component/content/article/70-spring04/spring04article/286-slavery-is-a-woman-race-gender-and-visibility-in-marie-benoists-portrait-dune-negresse-1800> (last accessed 02.07.15)

²⁰ Slavery within France proper had been banned in 1315, per an ordinance issued by Louis X. Colonial slaves who entered the metropole underwent an automatic change in status to 'servant' and were eligible to petition for emancipation while within the country's borders. A critical examination of this law appears in Samuel L. Chatman, "There are No Slaves in France": A Re-Examination of Slave Laws in Eighteenth-Century France', in *The Journal of Negro History* vol. 85, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 144-145.

²¹ Cameron, 'Benoist': 245.

²² Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (Routledge: London, 1999): 287.

²³ Image available at <http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/full.php?ID=65570> (last accessed 02.07.15)

²⁴ Timothy Bewes, *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (Princeton University Press: Princeton NJ, 2010): 33.

²⁵ Ibid, 15.

²⁶ Sandra Ponzanesi, 'Beyond the Black Venus: Colonial Sexual Politics and Contemporary Visual Practices', in Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (eds), *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory* (Peter Lang: Oxford, 2005): 170.

²⁷ *The Curious in Ecstasy or Shoelaces* is my translation of the original French title *Les Curieux en extase ou les cordons de souliers*. 'THE BEAUTIFUL HOTTENTOT' is my translation of *LA BELLE HOTTENTOTE*, which appears entirely in capital letters in the etching.

²⁸ My translations of the captions 'Oh, godem, quel rosbif!' and 'Ah, que la nature est drôle!', respectively.

²⁹ Sadiya Qureshi, 'Displaying Sara Baartman, "The Hottentot Venus"', *History of Science* 42 (2004): 233-257.

³⁰ Smalls, 'Slavery is a Woman'.

³¹ Johann Kaspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, trans. Thomas Holcroft (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1789).

³² Smalls, 'Slavery is a Woman'.

³³ Image available at <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8413019c/f2.item> (last accessed 02.07.15)

³⁴ *The New Harlequin and His Friend Gilles at the Natural History Museum* is my translation of the original French title *Le Nouveau Arlequin et son ami Gilles au Muséum*.

³⁵ *Le Nouveau Arlequin et son ami Gilles au Muséum* (1800): 9; Deloynes Collection, vol. 22, no. 623: 327. My translation of

GILLES: Mon ami, je ne veux plus rester ici; j'ai vu le diable.

ARLEQUIN: Où donc?

GILLES: Regarde, *Portrait of a Negress* par une femme.

ARLEQUIN: Air: *Récitatif de Leonidas*.

A qui se fier dans la vie,

Après une pareille horreur!

C'est une main blanche et jolie

Qui nous a fait cette *noirceur*'.

³⁶ Charmaine Nelson, 'Venus Africaine: Race, Beauty and African-ness', in Jan Marsh (ed.), *Black Victorians: Black People in British Art 1800-1900* (Manchester: Manchester Art Galleries, 2005): 53.

³⁷ Grigsby, *Extremities*: 20-21.

³⁸ Nelson, 'Venus Africaine': 49.

³⁹ Mulvey, 'On *Duel in the Sun*: Afterthoughts and Narrative Cinema', in *Framework* nos 15-17 (1981): 12-15.

⁴⁰ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999): 257-287.

⁴¹ Mary Roberts, 'Contested Terrains: Women Orientalists and the Colonial Harem', in Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts (eds), *Orientalism's Interlocuters: Painting, Architecture, Photography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002): 181.

⁴² Iradj Amini, *Napoleon and Persia: Franco-Persian Relations under the First Empire within the Context of Rivalries between France, Britain and Russia*, trans. Azizeh Azodi (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999): 102.

⁴³ *The Newspaper of the Empire* is my translation of *Le Journal de l'Empire*.

⁴⁴ *Journal de l'Empire*, 4 August 1808; quoted in Amini, *Napoleon and Persia*, 141.

⁴⁵ Amini, *Napoleon and Persia*: 143-144.

⁴⁶ Amy Fine, 'Césarine Davin-Mirvault: *Portrait of Bruni* and Other Works by a Student of David', in *Woman's Art Journal* vol. 4, no.1 (Spring-Summer 1983): 20.

⁴⁷ Fine, 'Césarine Davin-Mirvault': 16-17, 19. The occupational title of Davin-Mirvault's husband literally translates as "inspector to Parma." Unfortunately, I have been unable to find information as to his job description.

⁴⁸ Sheila R. Canby, *Islamic Art in Detail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005): 80. Information on the socio-political significance of the Persian turban and the *kullah* around which it is wound is either outdated or exists outside of peer-reviewed scholarly journals. Sir Thomas Edward Gordon mentions a 'class of "roughs" known as the *kullah-numdah* (felt-caps; they wear a brown hard-felt low hat without a brim'. See *Persia Revisited* (London: Edward Arnold, 1895): 74. Eli Sanders provides a vague and overly broad history of the turban, noting that 'by 1000 BCE, [it] had evolved from a strictly utilitarian piece of clothing to something used to connote nobility and power'. See 'Understanding Turbans: Don't Link Them to Terrorism', in *The Seattle Times* (27 September 2001):

<http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=20010927&slug=turban270> (last accessed 02.07.15). Considering these sources with the height of the ambassador's turban in Davin-Mirvault's portrait, it is possible that the height of headgear was relative to social status. However, given the dearth of specific and reliable scholarship, this possibility is conjecture at best.

⁴⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978): 59.

⁵⁰ Fine, 'Césarine Davin-Mirvault': 19.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 20, n.31.

⁵² Image available at <http://prints.bl.uk/art/578354/fath-ali-shah-king-of-persia-1797-1834> (last accessed 02.07.15)

⁵³ Layla Diba, 'Portrait of Fath 'Ali Shah', Annenberg Learner, 2013: <http://www.learner.org/courses/globalart/work/8/index.html> (last accessed 02.07.15).

⁵⁴ Said, *Orientalism*: 1.

⁵⁵ Amini, *Napoleon and Persia*: 2-3.

⁵⁶ Ponzanesi, 'Beyond the Black Venus': 167.

⁵⁷ Clarisse Zimra, 'Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound', in Assia Djebar (author), *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, trans. Marjolijn de Jager (University Press of Virginia: Charlottesville VA, 1992): 139, *passim*.

⁵⁸ Ponzanesi, 'Beyond the Black Venus': 168 and Zimra, 'Forbidden Gaze': 136-137.

⁵⁹ Ponzanesi, 'Beyond the Black Venus': 168; and Zimra, 'Forbidden Gaze': 138.

⁶⁰ Zimra, 'Forbidden Gaze': 136.

⁶¹ Full beards, in the Western tradition, have symbolized potent masculinity for thousands of years, dating at least to Classical Greece. This could be another factor in any allure associated with Askar-Khan. For more on beards and masculinity, see Alun Whitley, 'Beards and Whiskers', Arts and Ideas Free Thinking Lecture, The Sage Gateshead, Gateshead Quays, United Kingdom, *BBC Radio 3*, podcast audio, 7 November 2014: http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/radio3/r3arts/r3arts_20141107-2245b.mp3 (last accessed 02.07.15)

⁶² Sources consulted include François Guizot, *De L'état des beaux-arts en France et du Salon de 1810* (Paris, Chez Maradan, 1810); *Journal des arts, des sciences et de la littérature* (15 November 1810-25 March 1811); Charles-Paul Landon, *Recueil des ouvrages de peinture, sculpture, architecture, gravure en taille-douce, en médailles et en pierres fines citées dans le rapport du jury sur les prix décennaux exposés le 25 août [sic] 1810 dans le grand salon du Musée Napoléon* (Paris: Charles-Paul Landon, 1810); Landon, *Annales du musée et de l'école moderne des beaux-arts: Salon de 1810* (Paris: Charles-Paul Landon, 1810); and *Le Palais-Royal ou coup de l'oeil sur les tems [sic] présent: Visite de Mirabeau au Salon de 1810* (Paris: Chez Janet et Cotelle, 1811).

⁶³ Said, *Orientalism*: 138.

⁶⁴ Hollis Clayson, 'Henri Regnault's Wartime Orientalism', in Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts (eds), *Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002): 156.

⁶⁵ Said, *Orientalism*: 207.

⁶⁶ Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Knopf: New York, 1993): 98-99. Said points out that it was under Napoleon's rule (1799-1815) that French academic institutions shaped the development of Orientalism and its related disciplines.

⁶⁷ Fine, 'Césarine Davin-Mirvault': 19.

⁶⁸ Grigsby, *Extremities*: 240-314.

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Hailing the Past: Anselm Kiefer's *Occupations* *

Gillian Kennedy

Abstract

This essay concerns Anselm Kiefer's *Occupations*, photographs he had taken of himself in 1969, making the Nazi salute in various historic European locations, a selection of which, published in 1975, caused sharp controversy. It discusses the deliberate and unresolved ambiguity of the work, as it relates to Germany's Nazi past, in the context of the post-war inter-generational conflict concerning that past. It draws on three essays by the German philosopher most acutely engaged with issues respecting the attitude of Germans to their recent history, namely Theodor W. Adorno.

In 1975, the Cologne-based art magazine *Interfunktionen*, then under the editorship of Benjamin Buchloh, published in its twelfth issue an art work, *Occupations* (*Besetzungen*), by the young German artist Anselm Kiefer, consisting of a series of eighteen photographs in which the artist performs the Nazi salute in either a landscape setting or before historical monuments.¹ The salute had been an illegal act since 1945.² The Belgian artist and poet Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976), outraged at what he considered to be the publication of fascist imagery, withdrew in protest one of his artist's books which was to have been published under the mantle of *Interfunktionen*.³ The scandal triggered by Kiefer's transgressive photographs spread, funding was cut off for the next issue as dealers withdrew their advertisements, while curators and artists registered their dismay, among them the magazine's founding editor, Fritz Heubach.⁴ *Interfunktionen*, founded in the heady days of 1968, and the most radical art journal of its time, was forced to close.⁵

According to Buchloh, Broodthaers, at the time living in West Germany, accused Kiefer of being a 'fascist who thinks he's an anti-fascist'.⁶ Unwittingly (or perhaps astutely), Broodthaers went straight to the heart of the difficulty posed by Kiefer's work, that is its troubling ambiguity: it can appear simultaneously both fascist and anti-fascist. In this essay, I explore the nature of this ambiguity, evaluating Kiefer's art in relation to texts by the philosopher Theodor Adorno, written in the period just prior to when Kiefer was making the work centered around the Nazi salute.

There has been, to date, no published study dedicated to the *Occupations*,⁷ although the literature on Kiefer certainly discusses them, notably Lisa Saltzman, in her book *Anselm Kiefer and Art after Auschwitz*.⁸ While Adorno does play a significant part in her book – as its title suggests – Saltzman's main emphasis is on Adorno's statements about the 'barbarity' of writing lyric poetry after Auschwitz, which are informed, she argues, by the Hebraic proscription of images. Adorno, for her, thereby has relevance not to the *Occupations*, with their human image, but to Kiefer's later paintings where the figure is absent.⁹ I draw instead on Adorno's contrast between the committed and the autonomous work of art, and on his critique of the German desire to 'overcome' the past, in my aim to address the question of ambiguity, with respect to the *Occupations* and related work. What I do take up from Saltzman's analysis of *Occupations* is her exploration of what she calls their 'filial thematics',¹⁰ whereby the parental Nazi past frames the identity of the son.¹¹ In this connection, I also draw on the ideas of the psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, both of whom were part of the same Frankfurt intellectual circle as

Adorno, and whose work explored the post-war Germans' complex relationship to the National Socialist past.

The photographs comprising *Occupations* were first shown in 1969 at the Karlsruhe Academy of Fine Art as part of Kiefer's diploma show, which also included some closely related paintings, the *Heroische Sinnbilder* (Heroic Symbols).¹² So uncomprehending and hostile was the reaction of many of the teaching staff and students at the Karlsruhe Akademie, that only the intervention of Kiefer's tutor and one other member of staff ensured that he received a diploma.¹³ Kiefer did not exhibit the photographs again prior to their reproduction in *Interfunktionen*.¹⁴ As presented in the magazine, eighteen photographs are spread over twelve pages; three in horizontal format and three in vertical format are allowed an entire page each, while the remaining twelve are two to a page. All the photographs are printed right to the edge of the paper, so the printed page is itself the artwork, a self-contained work of art made for a magazine by the artist, and not a pre-existing artwork replicated. Artist-led publication was very much in the tradition of *Interfunktionen* where, under its founding editor Fritz Heubach, contributing artists themselves designed the magazine pages.¹⁵

The photographs are reproduced with the typed slips of paper Kiefer had pasted to them indicating the location or subject matter of the scene. These labels are sometimes tatty, the typed lettering has not always registered, and this gives the work a certain fragility as if the photographs had come from some moribund archive. The first image, full-page, is labeled *Anselm Kiefer / Zwischen Sommer und Herbst*

1969 habe ich die Schweiz, Frankreich und Italien besetzt, Ein paar Fotos: (Between summer and autumn 1969 I occupied Switzerland, France and Italy. A few photos:). Kiefer is dressed up in the semblance of a Nazi uniform, performing the *Heil Hitler* salute in an array of settings in different countries: by the sea at Sète, before Lake Luzern at Küssnacht, in the arcades of the Colosseum [fig.1]. He visits the Roman necropolis Les Alyscamps in Arles, and Vignola's Farnese Palace at Caprarola. Other labels identify Bellinzona, Montpellier, Pompeii, Vesuvius, and Paestum. Young Germans of Kiefer's generation travelling round Europe commonly met with hostile reception from people who had experienced German occupation. If Kiefer's sardonic title evokes the immediate past, his choice of famous tourist sites points to a more banal present, a different kind of German invasion.



Fig. 1: Anselm Kiefer, 'Colosseum', *Occupations*, 1969. Black and white photograph, reproduced in *Interfunktionen* 12, 1975. © the artist. Photo: The British Library, London.

The monuments themselves are remnants of power and empire, with connotations of death and the passing of time. The large empty settings, and often the type of architecture, evoke the ceremonial spaces of the Third Reich. There are also two 'jokers' in this pack, where Kiefer, supported on a stool placed in the bathtub in his studio, gives the illusion of standing on the surface of the water [fig. 2]. On the final page, the artist turns his back, thus closing the sequence like the end cover of a book, a romantic, Friedrich-like figure standing in solitude on a rocky shore, facing out to sea [fig. 3].



Fig. 2: Anselm Kiefer, 'Gehen auf Wasser. Versuch in der Badewanne zu Hause im Atelier', *Occupations*, 1969. Black and white photograph, reproduced in *Interfunktionen 12*, 1975. © the artist. Photo: The British Library, London.

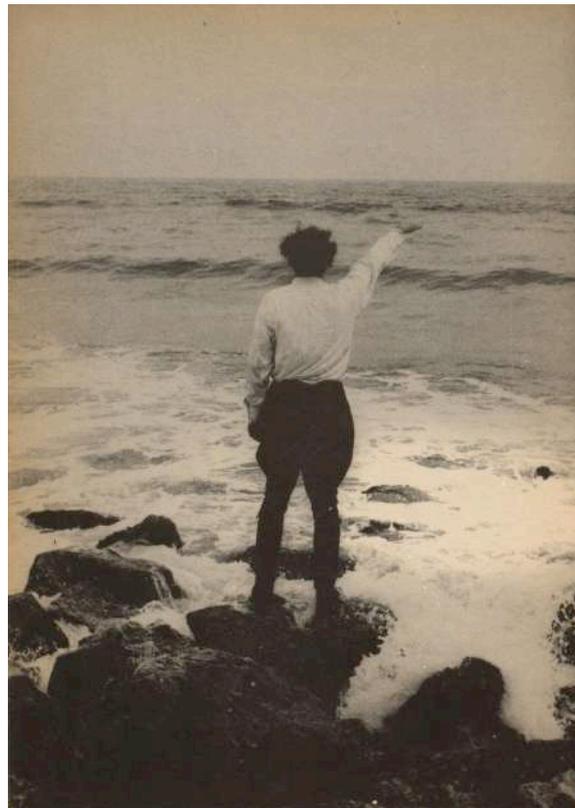


Fig. 3: Anselm Kiefer, no title, *Occupations*, 1969. Black and white photograph, reproduced in *Interfunktionen 12*, 1975. © the artist. Photo: The British Library, London.

Occupations has all the appearance of a dispassionate conceptual work of art – its use of text, the documenting of travel with snapshot-like (although precisely composed) photos, its deadpan parody of a Nazi stereotype performed by the artist. But the gesture of the Nazi salute and its repetition over twelve pages¹⁶ is both insistent and provocative, the more so when the artist appears to make light of it. That a sophisticated art public¹⁷ should react with such hostility to Kiefer's images confirms the force of the gesture, its power to compel, its ability to stir memories of a past best forgotten. The representation of an illegal gesture entailed the breaking of a taboo, and hence the potential to shock.

The version of the Nazi salute that is most familiar to us now is the *Sieg Heil* call and response which was performed at mass rallies. Far more common, in fact, a part of everyday normality, was the *Hitler Gruss*, the German greeting. Within months of Hitler's seizing power in 1933, it became compulsory to use the Nazi *Gruss* in party and state buildings and before commemorative sites.¹⁸ Through a series of laws and edicts it replaced all other forms of greeting in the course of all social intercourse. In fact, though called a *Gruss*, it was, in practice, a continually repeated oath of allegiance to Hitler. The right arm raised to eye level was accompanied by the words 'Heil Hitler' so that 'instead of coming closer to one another, the participants in the greeting distanced themselves in the very moment of their encounter'.¹⁹ Hitler, invoked in the greeting, became their mystical bond, 'in a devotional space of mutual estrangement, one that, paradoxically, created between them a kind of cohesion in their very isolation from each other'.²⁰ Throughout every day, every member of society was coerced into assent. The Kiefer images, therefore, could summon for the

German viewer not only military power, but civic obedience, a reminder of a popular compliance with Nazism that had become, quite literally, a reflex.

In the 1960s, the complicity of the German population with the former Nazi regime came to be the subject of contentious debate, sustained at a theoretical level by, in particular, the writing and teaching of Theodor Adorno, and in broader public terms by the actions and protests of young Germans of Kiefer's generation. In his sociological work, Adorno had examined topics such as the authoritarian personality, anti-Semitism, and the Germans' relationship to the Nazi past. As a Marxist and opponent of Fascism during the 1930s, the philosopher, who had returned to Germany from exile in 1949²¹ to work in the refounded Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, was greatly exercised with what he saw as a dangerous German glossing-over of collective participation in Nazism. He writes that those that lived through the period, in order to assuage their guilt, underplay its horrors, brush them aside, telling their children 'in fact it was not so awful'.²² The fact that from 1964 onwards, Adorno himself came to be the target of protest by the students, even though his teaching had influenced them, was due to his insistence on not prematurely linking theory to praxis.²³ In a letter of 19 June 1969 to Herbert Marcuse, Adorno wrote: 'You think that praxis— in its emphatic sense— is not blocked today; I think differently. I would have to deny everything that I think and know about the objective tendency if I wanted to believe that the student protest movement in Germany had even the tiniest prospect of effecting a social intervention'.²⁴ Yet it remains the case that Adorno addressed the students' concerns regarding the persistence of the fascist past, rigorously and in depth, even if he came to occupy a

difficult and acutely uncomfortable position in the intergenerational conflict. It is in relation to this context of intense disagreement over the German past that the work of Kiefer, born in 1945, must be seen. In their flagrant overtness, the *Occupations* might seem to confront the viewer and reverse the covering over of the past that so troubled Adorno. That, however, is not how Broodthaers saw them; and in any case, so straightforward a reading would entail a more facile response to art than Adorno himself advocated. In three closely relevant essays Adorno shows a consistent concern that the German conscience should not be so easily salvaged.

Adorno's essay 'Engagement' (translated into English as 'Commitment') was broadcast on Radio Bremen in 1962, published in the journal *Die Neue Rundschau* in the same year, and republished in 1965,²⁵ while 'The meaning of working through the past' first appeared in print in 1959, and was repeated a few months later in a slightly altered version as a radio talk.²⁶ The former is concerned with the relationship of art to politics, and with the question of 'engaged writing', with particular reference to the ideas and practice respectively of Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertolt Brecht; the latter essay, which does not touch on art, deals with the question of the danger posed by the German wilful forgetting of the past. A third essay, 'Education after Auschwitz' (1967),²⁷ reiterates this theme while emphasizing the role of pedagogy and 'the turn to the subject' in countering the force exerted by what the writer terms the administered universe, which he defines in a study of 1952–53 as 'an all-comprising net of organisation with no loopholes where the individual could "hide" in the face of [social demands]'.²⁸

In 'Commitment', Adorno makes important observations on the dramatic and cinematic representation of Nazism, and on the issue of art after Auschwitz. These are obviously germane to the present discussion, but so, also, are aspects of his overall argument, which concerns the relationship between 'engaged' and 'autonomous' art. This argument has a direct bearing on two major aspects of the critical problem raised by Kiefer's work, that is to say, the question of his intention and also that concerning reception. Adorno contends that the artist should not seek to determine the content of the work, but should give priority to questions of form, 'the objective demands of composition', over any expressive or didactic aims. 'The author's motivations', he writes, 'are irrelevant to the finished work'.²⁹ This is true in a positive sense when the work engages with reality independently of the artist's intention, and in so doing causes a deep and productive disturbance in those who receive it. Radical art embeds itself in contemporary reality, and stirs it up. Adorno makes these assertions with particular reference to the German political and cultural context.

Adorno does not spell out these ideas very directly; it is rather that they emerge, somewhat tortuously, in the course of a critical engagement with the theories and practice of Sartre and Brecht. While there are parallels between his respective criticisms of the two writers, there are also important differences, in part reflecting the difference in national context. However, common to both committed and political theatre, associated with Sartre and Brecht respectively, is, in his view, the shortcoming of signalling intentions, of being excessively legible. In Sartre's case it is a question of plays that simply enact his philosophical themes, plays with a thesis.

With Brecht, the complexities of political reality are simplified, his plays are not truthful, and, in the worst cases, 'bad politics becomes bad art, and vice-versa'.³⁰ Of the two, Brecht is, in Adorno's view, certainly the greater artist, and this because the dramatic writing entails a high degree of formalisation and abstraction.³¹ It is not that Adorno values formalism *per se*; indeed, he appreciates Sartre's motives for supporting commitment as against fetishised art that flaunts an 'apoliticism that is in fact deeply political'.³² It is rather that he sees greater and more genuinely *political* force in art that is radical in form in a way that Sartre's is not. In his essay 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', Adorno claims that in 'constituting itself solely in accordance with its own laws', the work's 'distance from mere existence becomes the measure of what is false and bad in the latter'.³³ The aim of art, he writes in 'On Commitment', is not 'to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world'.³⁴

Is it possible to see Kiefer's *Occupations* as having the potential to offer such resistance? They are not manifestly 'autonomous' works in Adorno's terms, as they are not formalist in a modernist sense. Indeed, Kiefer's works participate in a reaction against the modernist abstraction that dominated post-war German painting in the 1950s. In its lukewarm and conventional character, however, this German abstraction served to give reassurance that Germany conformed to international cultural norms; seen in this context, the rebellion of Kiefer and others amounted, in its own way, to reclaiming the autonomy of art.³⁵ If, unlike the autonomous works Adorno sees as exemplary, namely those of Kafka and Beckett, these pieces by Kiefer do directly invoke politics, they are certainly radically unprecedented and, in formal terms, carefully considered. Kiefer has framed and composed the

photographs to calculated effect, and he exploits the austere formality of the monumental settings. It might, of course, be possible to see in them a calculated compromise of the kind Adorno criticises, 'a compromise between commitment and autonomy, . . . a sort of mixture of advanced formal elements with an intellectual content inspired by genuinely or supposedly progressive politics'.³⁶ However, Kiefer's work seems too radically unstable to be seen in such terms, and too novel in what it presents. It is surely rather *uncompromising*, above all in its refusal to make clear how it is to be taken, to eliminate ambiguity. Broodthaers's critical remark: 'who's this fascist who thinks he's an anti-fascist?' is, in a sense, evidence in Kiefer's favour. There is no declaration of intention.

Kiefer, then, satisfies Adorno's criteria to this extent: he does not aim at a specific outcome, yet a strongly disconcerted response was evoked by his work. Adorno stresses the importance of aspiring not to direct communication but rather towards 'what the shock of the unintelligible can communicate'.³⁷ For him, Sartre's plays are at their best when they by-pass the author's philosophical programme: 'they display in their respect for truth the whole administered universe which his philosophy ignores: the lesson we learn from them is one of unfreedom'.³⁸

Adorno's remarks on intention are closely tied to what he has to say about reality. What he means by reality is not anything reflecting social consensus, or answering to the criteria of Social Realism: 'when the social contract with reality is abandoned, and literary works no longer speak as though they were repeating facts, hairs start to

bristle'.³⁹ What he actually means when he goes on to refer to a 'reality' that does not reduce to 'fact', is a reality we suppress or refuse to acknowledge, one therefore that is more likely to break in *unbidden* than to be directly grasped, as with the intrusive intimation of an 'administered universe' that he finds undoing the intended meaning of Sartre's plays, as we have noted.⁴⁰ There, reality is seen to undermine both Sartre's notion of individual free choice and artistic intention.⁴¹ Indeed, Adorno notes that it is Sartre himself who 'has seen the connection between the autonomy of a work and an intention which is not conferred upon it but is its own gesture towards reality',⁴² a reality which the work itself summons. He quotes Sartre on 'the appeal which issues from every painting, every statue, every book'⁴³ and adds, 'there is no straightforward relationship between this appeal and the thematic commitment of a work'.⁴⁴ The *Occupations* gesture towards reality in a more literal sense than Adorno meant. In summoning an image that Germans might too easily dismiss as belonging to history, Kiefer also gestured more disturbingly towards their abiding and unacknowledged relationship to what they had so studiously consigned to the past.

Germans are, for Adorno, schooled by tradition to renounce the pleasure afforded by autonomous art – a pleasure intensified by discord and dissonance – in favour of the moral and the improving. 'This is why today autonomous rather than committed art should be encouraged in Germany. Committed works all too readily credit themselves with every noble value, and then manipulate them at their ease. Under fascism too, no atrocity was perpetrated without a moral veneer'.⁴⁵ For Adorno, idealistic didacticism in art merely reinforces conformity. 'The notion of a "message" in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world:

the stance of the lecturer conceals a clandestine entente with the listeners, who could only be rescued from deception by refusing it.⁴⁶ Autonomous works, by contrast, are not bearers of messages, but operate obliquely and dialectically: ‘as eminently constructed and produced . . . [they]. . . point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life’.⁴⁷ He adds, ‘the content of works of art is never the amount of intellect pumped into them: if anything, the opposite’.⁴⁸ Adorno thus disparages not only deliberation and intention in art, but specifically noble intention, positive and even revolutionary aims. While it is clear, once more, that the *Occupations* differ in essential respects from what Adorno means here by autonomous works, they answer to his criteria in an oblique way, by gesturing unsettlingly in a direction opposite to the just life.

If Adorno places so little value on thematic commitment, it is additionally for the reason that it not only fails in its objective, but is self-defeating. It is on this ground that he criticizes Brecht’s play *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, which renders fascism innocuous when the author subjects it to ridicule. He makes a similar charge against Charlie Chaplin’s film *The Great Dictator*. Adorno’s worry about Brecht’s play is that by ridiculing fascism, it trivializes it and minimizes its real presence and danger; the audience feels safe and is lulled into a false sense of security. Brecht’s practice is no longer dialectical. Adorno reminds us that fascism is not ‘extra-territorial’, but ‘rooted within society itself’.⁴⁹ In similar vein, Adorno admonishes Chaplin for evoking ‘the buffoonery of fascism’ in *The Great Dictator*,⁵⁰ and for showing – falsely – that it is possible for a Jewish girl to assault a line of storm-

troopers without fear of retaliation. In this untruth the film 'loses all satirical force and becomes obscene'.⁵¹

Now the question is whether Kiefer's performance of the Nazi salute is vulnerable to Adorno's criticisms; do the twelve pages in *Interfunktionen* merely parody and trivialise the twelve years of National Socialism? As remarked earlier, the work shows the recognizable characteristics of conceptual art of the period, it is quite cool and distanced; but those qualities, which may be classified as 'formal', also lighten the tone in a way that is consistent with parody. The opening photograph shows the artist aligned in the centre of the visual field, posing on a monumental staircase above an ornate window whose oval shape is repeated horizontally by two knobbly branches of a pollarded tree which decoratively frame the Nazi salute, making the image a rococo or art nouveau frontispiece to the series of photographs [fig. 4]. Exact placing, scale and proportion are similarly observed in a photo where Kiefer poses before the equestrian statue of Louis XIV in Montpellier [fig. 5]. The artist positions himself to appear equal in size to the statue whose gesture he mimics, so that equal divisions demarcate figures and spaces, from top to bottom of the image. This exactness itself makes for a sense of the ludicrous. It does not follow, though, that the work trivializes fascism as Adorno found Brecht and Chaplin did; the presentation is too blank and abrupt to resolve into humour.



Fig. 4: Anselm Kiefer, 'Anselm Kiefer / Zwischen Sommer und Herbst 1969 habe ich die Schweiz, / Frankreich und Italien besetzt. Ein paar Foto', *Occupations*, 1969. Black and white photograph, reproduced in *Interfunktionen 12*, 1975. © the artist. Photo: The British Library, London.



Fig. 5: Anselm Kiefer, 'Montpellier', *Occupations*, 1969. Black and white photograph, reproduced in *Interfunktionen* 12, 1975. © the artist. Photo: The British Library, London.

Kiefer's 'uniform' is cobbled together from a variety of clothing, aiming at a military effect.⁵² His clothes are limp and ill-fitting, and fall in unbecoming folds, the jacket is secured by only one button and, as he raises his arm to make the salute, the jacket strains at its single fastening and rides up. The hair is too long and ungroomed for a Nazi and the artist is bespectacled and moustached. His slovenly appearance combined with a far from military posture conspire against his being taken for the

genuine article. There is no burlesque here, no exaggeration. It is clear in any case that he is not trying to exactly replicate the physical appearance of a Nazi. In the majority of the photos, Kiefer's figure is diminutive within the visual field, sometimes to the point of absurdity – especially in the seaside images taken at Sète where he appears as a just visible, miniaturized figure far in the distance, bisected by the line of the horizon [fig. 6].

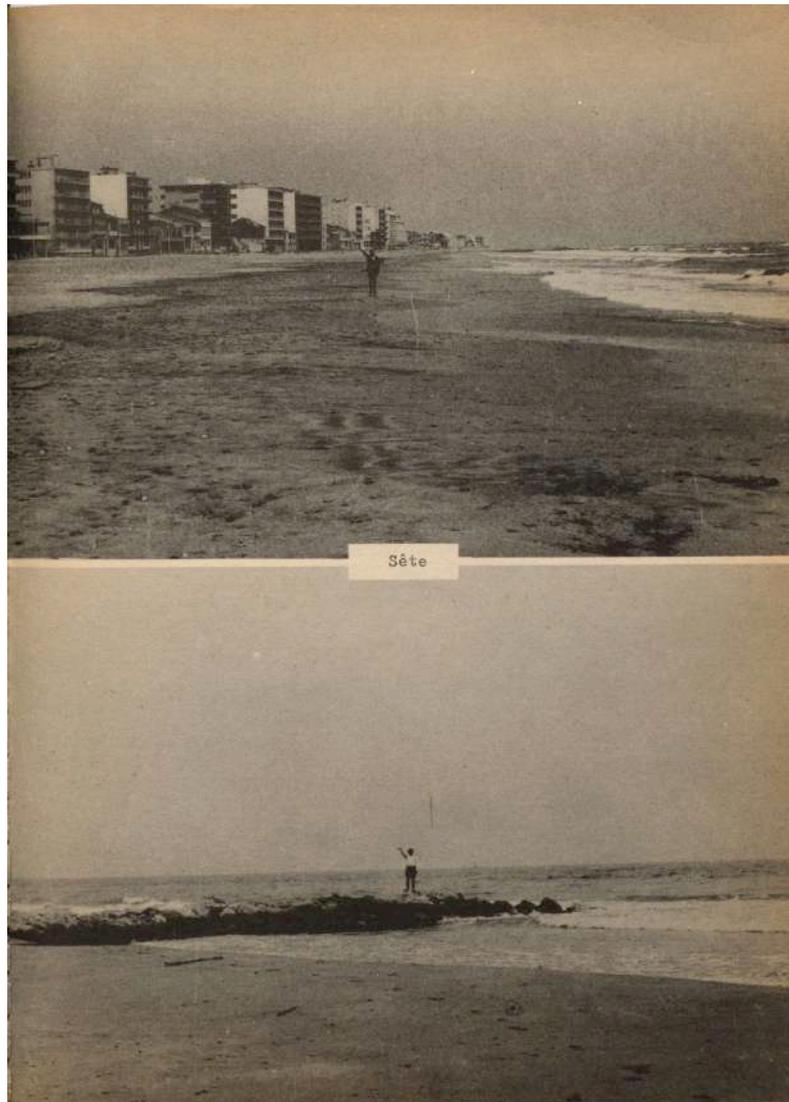


Fig. 6: Anselm Kiefer, 'Sète', *Occupations*, 1969. Black and white photograph, reproduced in *Interfunktionen* 12, 1975. © the artist. Photo: The British Library, London.

With the exception of the odd passer-by, who ignores Kiefer's gesture, the artist is alone, he salutes to a void and absence. No chanting crowds join in the *Sieg Heil*, and there is nobody to greet. Clearly there is no attempt to recreate Third Reich aesthetics; neither is this costume drama or historical reconstruction.

Yet despite the diminution in scale, the potency of the salute remains ineradicable, and is perhaps even enhanced through the isolation of the gesturing figure, its very incongruity. Rather than being normalised, made harmless, the bizarre and even absurd character of the Nazi *Gruss* is uniquely brought out, though not in a way that permits a sense of safe distance. Indeed, there is a sense in which Kiefer's enactment and staging impose an involuntary participation on the viewer. Precisely because he is so evidently play-acting, so manifestly not a perfectly accoutred Nazi, the viewer must invest the image with the real meaning of the gesture, and in that sense inhabit it. Had Kiefer costumed and staged the scenarios more impeccably, they would have been seen as from a distance, externally, perhaps as sinister or camp. As it is, the viewer must find the Nazi in the man, the human individual; this reflects an insight of Sartre's, namely that the illusion of impersonation requires that the impersonator remain distinctly him- or her-self.⁵³ Only on that condition can possession take place, with our participation. The adverse reaction of Germans at the time of first viewing would, on this analysis, seem justified. The images got under their skins.

It is also in 'Commitment' that we find one of Adorno's several statements concerning the unthinkable – and yet on some grounds also the necessity – of art after Auschwitz.⁵⁴ His discussion here of the need for art to give voice to suffering is not of immediate relevance to the *Occupations*, but the general issue of what kind of art is possible after Auschwitz certainly is.⁵⁵ Although the works are not of a kind Adorno ever envisaged, they certainly constitute powerful affirmations of art, its 'terrifying power', and enlist the imagery of Nazism to that end.⁵⁶ This is art after *Nazism*. Leaving unanswered for the time being the question raised by Broodthaers as to whether this is fascist art, what remains undeniable is that here Nazism and art stand in juxtaposition. The Nazi is the artist. Kiefer poses, in costume, in his studio where he performs a miracle of art – walking on water [fig. 2].⁵⁷ Seen in this light, his occupations of major cultural sites are specifically *artistic* acts of possession. If the images verge on the ridiculous, they also veer towards hubris, an assertion of artistic power. Ostensibly, the work connects artistic innovation with Nazi imagery, without obviously celebrating fascism, yet not manifestly opposing it either. This unsettling dialectic could be said to come within reach of Adorno's troubled reflections on art and Auschwitz.

Adorno's underlying concern was that Auschwitz, and all that it signified, might be obliterated from memory or falsely assimilated, neutralised, so that life might go on as usual. This theme, developed in Adorno's essay 'The meaning of working through the past', is of great relevance to Kiefer's own artistic practice, in so far as it entailed examining and re-enacting, or making visible, a German history which was silenced and suppressed in the immediate post-war period.

Adorno asks the question “‘What does working through the past mean?’”⁵⁸ He is critical of the contemporary German usage of the expression ‘working through the past’ (*Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*) which makes it synonymous with reappraising and ‘mastering the past’, and thus equivalent to the German term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, which connotes overcoming the past, both these terms being much in use in political rhetoric at the time. Instead of seriously working upon the past (here he uses the verb *verarbeiten* in distinction to *aufarbeiten*) ‘that is, through a lucid consciousness breaking its power to fascinate’, with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* ‘its intention is to close the books on the past, and, if possible, even remove it from memory’.⁵⁹ Adorno continues that it is not up to the perpetrators to decide whether the past can be forgotten; only those who have suffered injustice have the right to forgive and forget. Despite the Allied attempts at the immense task of de-nazification, many former Nazis and their sympathizers emerged unscathed (sometimes with Allied connivance) and occupied positions of power within post-war Germany. These are Adorno’s ‘ambiguous figures [who] make their comeback’.⁶⁰ Adorno argues that the Nazi past is not being addressed and for that reason it continues into the present; that within the new German democracy imposed by the Allies ‘National Socialism lives on’ ‘whether it is merely the ghost of what was so monstrous that it lingers on after its own death, or whether it has not yet died at all . . .’⁶¹

Adorno remarks on the current lack of interest in history and fears the destruction of memory itself, the devil’s innermost principle in Goethe’s *Faust*.⁶² The loss of

memory is a result not only of the individual's unwillingness to remember, in the attempt to suppress guilt, but is also due to conditions in bourgeois society itself, subject to the law of exchange, which, Adorno says, is 'in its very essence . . . something timeless'. 'Concrete time', he continues, 'vanishes from industrial production. It transpires more and more in identical and spasmodic, potentially simultaneous cycles and hardly requires accumulated experience any more.'⁶³

Benjamin Buchloh's retrospective remark on the *Occupations* uses language that, whether consciously or not, recalls that of Adorno's essay: the *Occupations*, he said, suggested 'a real working through of German history. You have to inhabit it to overcome it.'⁶⁴ He uses more programmatic language than Adorno, who, of course, expressly repudiates the notion of 'overcoming'. However, the idea of 'inhabiting' the past is indeed apt, and Kiefer himself remarked, apropos of another project dating to 1969, the *Flooding of Heidelberg*, 'I do not identify with Nero or Hitler, but I have to re-enact what they did just a little bit in order to understand the madness. That is why I make these attempts to become a fascist'.⁶⁵ In performing the Nazi salute, Kiefer lets fascism take possession of his own bodily subjectivity.⁶⁶

A child of his time, the 24-year-old Kiefer set out in 1969 on a journey through several countries of western Europe to stage the photographs that he later used in *Occupations* and, combined with other material, in early books. He thus undertook, at the appropriate age, a strange re-enactment of the *Wanderjahre* of the romantics, of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. The photograph which closes *Occupations* restages a

famous romantic painting, Friedrich's *Wanderer in the sea of mist* [fig. 3], and the image of the solitary traveller is incongruously merged, throughout the series, with its polar opposite, the symbol of identification with the collective. Adorno wrote on the dangers inherent in such identification, warning that 'fascism lives on' in so far as 'the objective conditions of society that engendered fascism continue to exist'.⁶⁷ The economic order, he claimed, renders people dependent upon conditions beyond their control, and so, in order to survive, people must adapt, and thus 'they must negate precisely that autonomous subjectivity to which the idea of democracy appeals; they can preserve themselves only if they renounce their self'.⁶⁸ Kiefer neither renounces nor discloses the self, but his choice of words in describing these projects suggests an experience that is private and personal.

Kiefer's salutes may be read as a return of the repressed, the unbidden intrusion of what has been kept from consciousness, at once forbidden and inaccessible. Knowledge of the past was barred to Kiefer as a *Nachgeborene*, a member of a younger generation that had not directly experienced the Nazi period but was brought up in its aftermath. He puts on his father's clothes, found in his parents' attic, and so inhabits and embodies the role of his elders and works 'through' the German past, giving visible artistic form to a past he could not know at first hand.⁶⁹ Saltzman points out that the word *Besetzung* (Occupation), is used in German to denote the psychoanalytic term cathexis, meaning attachment and emotional investment in an object.⁷⁰

As Saltzman has indicated, the student revolt of 1968 in Germany was specifically directed against a generation responsible for Nazism,⁷¹ and this

'generation-conflict' which was ignited by the issue of fascism was a conflict between yesterday's perpetrators and their sons.⁷² The psychoanalyst Alexander Mitscherlich, who referred to this generation as the 'fatherless generation', used the term to indicate that the paternal role-models which had been discredited by fascism and the war could no longer exercise any lasting influence on that generation.⁷³ It seemed that the younger generation had 'rid' itself of its fathers and had 'overcome' them.⁷⁴ Yet, as Michael Schneider has shown in his article on the damaged relationship between the two generations, the theme of the father became an urgent literary topic in the so-called 'Father Literature' of the 1980s.⁷⁵ Schneider comments that 'the majority of the men and women who belong to my generation know little more about the former political lives of their parents and close family members and their experiences during the Third Reich than they know about what life was like during the Stone Age'.⁷⁶

In the various photographic stagings that provided material for Kiefer's early books and the *Occupations*, the artist at once enacts something and represents what he enacts. He finds out something for himself, 'understanding the madness', and appears in images for public exhibition, summoning up the Nazi past. For Adorno, any work done on the German past, if it was to be productive, entailed 'a turn towards the subject, the reinforcement of a person's self-consciousness and hence also of his self'.⁷⁷ This, arguably, is what is under way in these images. Kiefer stands in for others of his generation, children of those silent fathers, miming, as a child does, actions and gestures beyond his experience. This sense of childish imitation is

evident in the gaucheness of the images, the element of play-acting, the deliberate ineptitude.⁷⁸

Any attempt to characterize these works tends to arrive at a contradiction or an ambiguity. They are at once powerful and pathetic, assertive yet introspective. Broodthaers accuses Kiefer not of being intentionally fascist but of making work that is fascist in effect. While it is true that Kiefer does not determine a response, which would have been to provide a resolution of the kind Adorno condemns, it does not follow that he is not in control of his means, as Broodthaers seems to imply. The ambiguity is evidently deliberate and sustained. Kiefer stages both command and self-absorption. He casts himself as a hero and simultaneously in a more uncertain and childlike role, as embodying power and subject to it; the salute is both assertion and submission.

The disproportion in such antitheses comes out in the most pronounced way in a series of paintings, *Heroic Symbols*, most of which Kiefer painted in 1970. In the previous year he had made several books drawing on a greater range of photographs of himself saluting than he was to use in the *Occupations*, set in juxtaposition with watercolours, also of himself, and cut-out illustrations of views and of objects including Nazi sculpture. Two of these books bore the title *Heroische Sinnbilder* [fig. 7].⁷⁹

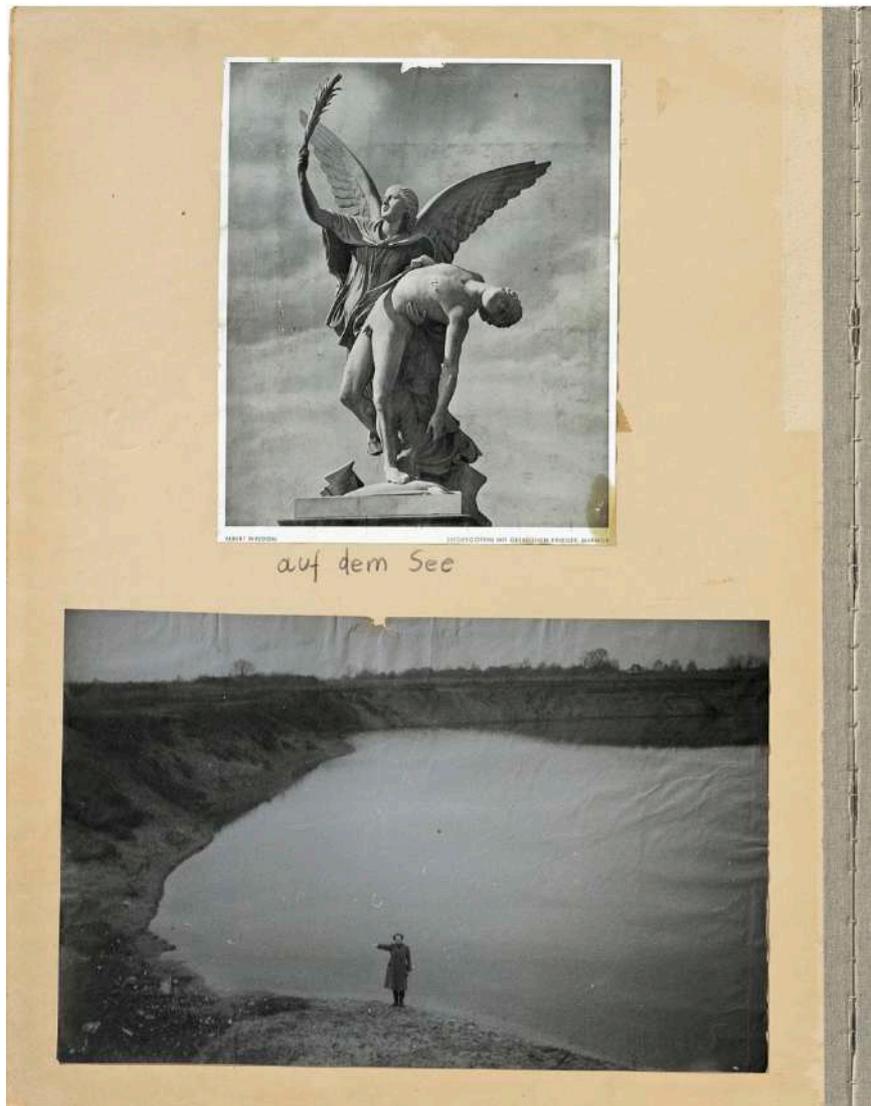


Fig. 7: Anselm Kiefer, 'auf dem See', magazine image and black and white photograph glued to paper. Page 10 in book *Heroische Sinnbilder I*, 1969. 66 x 50 x 8.5 cm, in possession of the artist. © the artist. Photo: Jörg von Bruchhausen, Berlin.

The paintings of the same name take up from the books the juxtaposition of saluting figures with sculptural monuments, and dramatise and enhance the dynamic of submission and domination through the use of vast scale. In *Heroische Sinnbilder II* and *V* the artist has depicted himself making the Nazi *Gruss* in seeming allegiance to massive but airborne statuary, and as if in mimetic obedience to its heroic gestures. In *Heroisches Sinnbild V* [fig. 8] three hefty monumental sculptures, supported only on cloud, hover above the far bank of a river, while the diminutive figure salutes in

profile on the near bank in the foreground. The outer monuments are by the two sculptors principally charged with state commissions in the Nazi period, Joseph Thorak (1889–1952) and Arno Breker (1900–1991), Kiefer having found the images in a magazine of the era, *Die Kunst im Deutschen Reich*. On the left is Thorak's *Monument to the young Friedrich II*, 1943; on the right, Breker's *The Departure of the Warrior*, 1940. The sculpture in the centre is *Nike Crowns the Victor*, of 1853, by Johann Friedrich Drake (1805–92). This stood on Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Berlin Schlossbrücke, whose sculpture – in storage at the time of Kiefer's painting – depicted warriors and winged victories or other goddesses in a neoclassical style;⁸⁰ the sculptural programme referred to the wars leading to the German defeat of Napoleon and the French, and so constituted an assertion of German nationalism. Kiefer's use of the motif of the Schlossbrücke statuary, coupled with works of Third Reich sculpture, inescapably suggest an analogy between Schinkel's nineteenth century plans for Berlin, and those for Germania, the prospective capital of the Third Reich, drawn up by Albert Speer (1905–1981), Hitler's chief architect and Minister of War Production.



Fig. 8: Anselm Kiefer *Heroisches Sinnbild V*, 1970. Oil on cotton, 150 x 260,5 cm, Würth Collection.
© the artist. Photo: Jörg von Bruchhausen, Berlin.

In *Heroisches Sinnbild II* [fig. 9] a massive sculptural group fills the right of the painting, while the small saluting figure stands further away and to the left.⁸¹ There is a disjunction between the vast landscape from which the figure looks upward, and the sky-like space surrounding the object of his attention, the sculpture group, which appears as if in a separate realm. This is August Wredow's (1804–1891) *Victory carrying the fallen youth to Olympia* (1857), also from the Schlossbrücke of Prussian Berlin. In giving such massive prominence to the group with the dead warrior, Kiefer invokes the Nazi cult of sacrifice and death, as exemplified in, for instance, Wilhelm Kreuz's design for a Funeral Hall for the Great German Soldiers in the Berlin Hall of Soldiers, whose vaulted space later became the subject of Kiefer's painting *Sulamith* (1983).



Fig. 9: Anselm Kiefer *Heroisches Sinnbild II*, 1970. Oil on cotton, 150 x 262,5 cm, Würth Collection. © the artist. Photo: Jörg von Bruchhausen, Berlin.

The grisaille rendering of the statues, while suggesting stone, also evokes a ghost-like presence, an oversized *revenant*; the naked youth is stony and yet has a living wound, painted in red. The disproportion, the sense of shifting realities, the image of the living dead, all cast in terms of Nazism and set in a Germanic landscape, summon up an intense emotional complex in terms strikingly responsive to the Mitscherlich's' analysis of the German 'inability to mourn' the loss of the Führer.⁸² This they diagnosed as being 'the result of an intensive defence against guilt, shame, and anxiety, a defence which was achieved by the withdrawal of previously powerful libidinal cathexes.'⁸³ They describe the Nazi past as being 'de-realized', it has become ghostly, 'emptied of reality'.⁸⁴ Kiefer's vast paintings, holding a repressed past suspended in an ambivalent reality, hover between withdrawal and return.

Like the Mitscherlichs, Adorno drew on Freud in his diagnoses of the German psychic condition. In his essay 'Education after Auschwitz', which reworks some of the themes of 'The meaning of working through the past', Adorno demonstrates that Auschwitz was produced by an extremely powerful societal tendency which it is difficult or impossible to change. If, as Freud argued, 'civilisation itself produces and increasingly reinforces anti-civilisation',⁸⁵ then 'there is something desperate in the attempt to rise up against it'.⁸⁶ In Adorno's metaphor, humanity is incarcerated in the net-like structures of the administered world, a world in which 'people who blindly slot themselves into the collective already make themselves into something like inert material, extinguish themselves as self-determined beings'.⁸⁷ The objective conditions of society cannot easily be changed, if at all. Therefore, attempts to avoid a repetition of Auschwitz must be aimed at the 'subjective dimension'.⁸⁸ 'the single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy, . . . the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not co-operating'.⁸⁹

Adorno's language, in his complex, probing reflections on the Germans' relationship to their past is strongly suggestive for the Kiefer of the *Occupations*, the early books and the paintings. The artist claims autonomy in the guise of its extreme opposite 'people who blindly slot themselves into the collective' and so 'extinguish themselves as self-determined beings'. Adorno also wrote of the past's 'power to fascinate' and of needing to break that power 'through a lucid consciousness'.⁹⁰ Kiefer's huge paintings fully embrace the power to fascinate; if they do not evidently yield lucidity, they might yet lead in that direction, through the psychic crisis they enact and provoke. For education after Auschwitz to have effect, Adorno advocates exposure

to 'all the anxiety that this reality warrants'.⁹¹ There is anxiety in Kiefer's imaging, at gigantic scale, of 'what was so monstrous that it lingers on after its own death'.⁹²

Endnotes

- * I would like to thank the following people for their valuable contribution to the realisation of this publication: Anselm Kiefer, for permission to reproduce his work, Aline Guillermet, my editor at *re-bus*, for her encouragement and many helpful suggestions, Christian Weikop, Brendan Prendeville, Alex García Düttmann, Anna-Maria Pfab at White Cube, Jackie Brown and Joanne Hawkins at the British Library, Coraly von Bismarck at Heiner Bastian Fine Art, Maria Theresia Heitlinger and Sonja Klee at the Würth Collection.
- ¹ Buchloh edited the 1974 and 1975 issues of *Interfunktionen*. A number for 1976 had been planned before the magazine folded in the wake of the Kiefer *Occupations* scandal.
- ² ‘Parades of military or political nature, the public playing and singing of Nazi anthems, and the public display of Nazi flags and other paraphernalia are prohibited by “Military Government Law No 154,” entitled “Elimination and Prohibition of Military Training.” The provisions of this law were reaffirmed in a Control Council policy statement approved September 20, 1945. Included are stipulations declaring illegal the use of Nazi and military uniforms and insignia, salutes, medals, anthems and music.’ Elmer Plischke, ‘Denazification law and procedure’ in *The American Journal of International Law*, vol. 41 (October 1947): 807–27 (822).
‘. . . the Nazi salute is not only reviled but illegal. Section 86 of the German Penal Code provides for punishment of up to three years in prison and fines for anyone using symbols “associated with unconstitutional organizations” – symbols being defined to include “flags, badges, uniforms, slogans, and forms of greeting.” The law explicitly bans the phrases “Heil Hitler” or “With German greetings” in written correspondence as well as the use of Sieg Heil in public speech. The sole exceptions are usages that are “ironic and clearly critical of the Hitler greeting,” and this exemption has led to scattered legal debates as to what constitutes an ironic use of the salute’. Tilman Allert, *The Hitler salute. On the meaning of a gesture*, trans. Jefferson Chase (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2008): 94–95.
- ³ Christine Mehring, ‘Continental Schrift. The Story of *Interfunktionen*’, in *Artforum* (May 2004): 178–183, 233 (179).
- ⁴ Friedrich Wolfram Heubach, a post-graduate student at the time of the magazine’s founding, was its editor until 1973.
- ⁵ *Interfunktionen* was founded by Heubach in 1968 in opposition to the market-driven conservatism of Documenta 4. For the history of the magazine see Mehring, ‘Continental Schrift’.
- ⁶ Mehring, ‘Continental Schrift’: 179.
- ⁷ Christian Weikop’s study devoted to Kiefer’s *Heroic Symbols* and *Occupations* will be published later in 2015. Information on Tate *In Focus* project on Anselm Kiefer is forthcoming at: <http://tate.org.uk/about/projects/focus>.

- ⁸ Lisa Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer and Art after Auschwitz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- ⁹ Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer*, in her first chapter entitled 'Thou shalt not make graven images'. She refers to such paintings as Kiefer's *Aaron* series (1984–85), the *Margarethe* and *Sulamith* works (1981–83), and the *Iconic Controversy* series (1977–80). Here Kiefer suggests human presence through metonymy, for example by introducing an artist's palette.
- ¹⁰ Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer*: 4.
- ¹¹ I disagree with Matthew Rampley, (Matthew Rampley, 'In Search of Cultural History: Anselm Kiefer and the Ambivalence of Modernism', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2000): 75–96 (82).) who regards Kiefer's own presence in the photographs as of secondary importance. For him, the gesture and the location are all that signify, yet the fact that it is the artist himself who performs the gesture, his very distinctive appearance and demeanour, together with the first-person preface to the *Interfunktionen* publication (which I will cite later), are surely essential aspects of the work.
- ¹² *Heroische Sinnbilder* nos II and V, which I discuss later, post-date Kiefer's Diploma Show in Karlsruhe, but some earlier paintings in the series were shown there. I am grateful to Christian Weikop for this information.
- ¹³ Götz Adriani (ed.), *The Books of Anselm Kiefer 1969–1990*, trans. Bruni Mayor, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990): 14.
Interview conducted by Tim Marlow with Kiefer in 2014: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/5NTy5fTgm7JYYq6sRQM0SGp/a-nselm-keifer-at-the-royal-academy> (accessed 25 June 2015).
Christian Weikop, 'Forests of Myth, Forests of Memory', in *Anselm Kiefer* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2014): 30–47. Weikop recounts that in interview with Kiefer, the artist told him that unlike his tutors, Joseph Beuys, whom Kiefer visited in Düsseldorf from 1971, approved of the *Occupations* photographs and *Heroic Symbols* artworks, and told him that his making the 'Sieg Heil' 'was a good action and for him action was art' (33 (fn 14)).
The reception of Kiefer's work remained largely hostile in Germany throughout the seventies and eighties; witness the critical outrage in response to his work shown in the West German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 1980. For a history and discussion of Kiefer's reception see Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer*: 97–123.
- ¹⁴ Christian Weikop (in personal communication 12 January 2015) has confirmed that Kiefer did not exhibit the *Heroic Symbols / Occupations* artworks again after his diploma show until the sequence of photographs which comprised *Occupations* was published in *Interfunktionen*. See Christian Weikop, Tate *In Focus* project on Anselm Kiefer. Kiefer returned to the theme of the *Occupations* in 2010 in an exhibition *Next Year in Jerusalem* at the Gargosian Gallery, New York. Here he showed 76 photographs from 1969, enlarged and mounted on lead and burlap, hung from the ceiling of a 35ft long steel container. The photographs could only be glimpsed through open doorways in the container.
- ¹⁵ The first issue was 'made of assorted papers printed, typed, or handwritten, including loose enclosures, foldouts, and collages of news clippings with scrawled citations'. Mehring, 'Continental Schrift': 179. *Occupations* is

- printed on paper different from that used for the features to either side of it. Issue 12 includes a foldout and a loose insert.
- ¹⁶ It is surely not accidental that *Occupations* ‘occupies’ twelve pages. The Third Reich lasted for twelve years.
- ¹⁷ The liberal-mindedness and sophistication of the intended readership may be gauged by the fact that the cover design of *Interfunktionen* 12 in which *Occupations* appeared, includes the word ‘cunt’.
- ¹⁸ Allert, *The Hitler Salute*: 30.
- ¹⁹ Ibid: 51.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) was born Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund and was half-Jewish by his father. In 1938 he followed other members associated with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt into exile in the United States, moving from New York to California in 1941 where he joined Max Horkheimer and Friedrich Pollock. After the war, Adorno returned to Frankfurt in 1949 to join the renewed Institute.
- ²² Theodor Adorno, ‘The meaning of working through the past’ in Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models, Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 89–103 (100).
- ²³ Adorno showed solidarity with the leftist student protests of 1968, but at the same time distanced himself from them. True to himself he insisted that a divergence between theory and praxis must be maintained. He was reported as saying in 1969, ‘When I made my theoretical model, I could not have guessed that people would want to realise it with Molotov cocktails.’ *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung* (26–27 April 1969): 10. Cited in Martin Jay, *Adorno* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1984): 55, 172 (fn 81).
- ²⁴ Esther Leslie, ‘Introduction to Adorno/Marcuse Correspondence on the German Student Movement’ in *New Left Review* 1/233 (January–February 1999): 118–136 (131). The article consists of Esther Leslie’s introduction, followed by her translation of the correspondence. Adorno feared the fascistic element in student extremism. ‘. . . that modes of behaviour . . . really display something of that thoughtless violence that once belonged to fascism’. Ibid: 128.
- ²⁵ ‘Engagement’ [1962] in *Noten zur Literatur III*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1965); ‘Engagement’ [1962] in Theodor Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 11, ‘Noten zur Literatur’, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003): 409–430. I refer to the English translation: Theodor Adorno, ‘Commitment’, trans. Francis McDonagh in *Aesthetics and Politics, Debates between Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno* (London: NLB, 1977): 177–95.
- ²⁶ ‘Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit?’ *Bericht über die Erzieherkonferenz am 6. und 7. November 1959 in Wiesbaden veranstaltet vom Deutschen Koordinierungsrat*, herausgegeben vom Deutschen Koordinierungsrat der Gesellschaften für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit (Frankfurt: Verlag Moritz Diesterweg, 1959). Radio lecture: ‘Was bedeutet: “Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit”?’ Hessischer Rundfunk, 7 February 1960. I will refer to the English translation already cited (see fn 22) as ‘Meaning’.

- ²⁷ Radio lecture: (shortened version) 'Pädagogik nach Auschwitz', Hessischer Rundfunk, 18 April, 1966.
'Erziehung nach Auschwitz' in *Zum Bildungsbegriff der Gegenwart*, ed. Heinz-Joachim Heydorn, et al. (Frankfurt: Verlag Moritz Diesterweg, 1967): 111–123. The essay is translated into English as 'Education after Auschwitz' in Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models, Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 191–204. I refer to it as 'Education'.
- ²⁸ The sentence quoted comes from a sociological study on astrology of 1952–53, 'From the stars down to earth'; the passage from which it comes contains one of the early appearances of the term 'die verwaltete Welt', which in English is translated as 'administered world' or 'administered universe': 'Anyhow, the world appears to most people today more as a "system" than ever before, covered by an all-comprising net of organisation with no loopholes where the individual could "hide" in face of the ever-present demands and tests of a society ruled by a hierarchical business set-up and coming pretty close to what we called "*verwaltete Welt*", a world caught by administration.' Theodor W Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, ed. and intro. Stephen Crook (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2001): 155; Theodor W Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. 9.2: 119. See also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSbSvLefQWI>, for a recording of a radio programme of 4 September 1950 broadcast by Hessischer Rundfunk: 'Die verwaltete Welt, oder: die Krise des Individuums', a discussion between Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Eugen Kogon (accessed 25 June 2015). Here Adorno describes how social pressures turn the individual into a 'Verwaltungsfunktionär seiner selbst', 'an administrative supervisor of oneself'. I am grateful to Alex García Düttmann for pointing me to these references.
- ²⁹ Adorno, 'Commitment': 181.
- ³⁰ Ibid: 187.
- ³¹ Ibid: 182.
- ³² Ibid: 177. Here Adorno sides with committed art over 'art that is content to be a fetish, an idle pastime for those who would like to sleep through the deluge that threatens them'.
- ³³ Theodor Adorno, 'Lyric Poetry and Society' in Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991): 37–54 (40).
- ³⁴ Adorno, 'Commitment': 180.
- ³⁵ Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer*: 11–13. The author quotes a speech made by the writer Günter Grass in May 1985 in which he talks of the dispute between 'objective' and 'non-objective' painters in the early 1950s, and accuses abstract painting of repressing imagery that might evoke the past (ibid: 12). Kiefer, in interview, has spoken of the predominance of Pop art during his student years. Kiefer's antipathy to Minimalism manifests itself in a book project *Koll bei Kiefer* (Koll visiting Kiefer) of 1969.
- ³⁶ Adorno, 'Commitment': 194.

- ³⁷ Ibid: 180.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Ibid. 'What remains is merely the abstract authority of a choice enjoined, with no regard for the fact that the very possibility of choosing depends on what can be chosen'.
- ⁴² Ibid: 190.
- ⁴³ Ibid. Adorno is quoting from Sartre's *What is literature?* Sartre is discussing the Kantian idea that art does not have an end, and adds that the reason is that it *is* an end. Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Qu'est-ce que la littérature ?' in *Situations II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).
- ⁴⁴ Adorno, 'Commitment': 190.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid: 193.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid: 194.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid: 184.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² It is not easy to ascertain exactly what Kiefer is wearing in *Occupations*. His jacket is never done up to the neck as a military tunic would be and sometimes he is in his shirt sleeves. While in most of the photographs he dresses in riding breeches tucked into high boots – not regular Wehrmacht uniform – in others he wears trousers. In the photograph taken at Bellinzona he has donned a military great coat, and he depicts himself in a similar coat in the two *Heroische Sinnbilder* paintings which I discuss later. He is never shown wearing a cap or helmet. Within the larger group of photographs he took around 1969 of the Nazi salute, Kiefer also wears a nightshirt and a crochet dress, as in the book *Für Genet* (1969).
- ⁵³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Imaginaire* (Paris: 1940); Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary, a Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, trans. Jonathon Webber (London: Routledge, 2004): 25–29.
- ⁵⁴ 'I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric; it expresses in negative form the impulse which inspires committed literature.' Adorno, 'Commitment': 188. Adorno first wrote that 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' in an essay of 1949, 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft', published in 1951 and subsequently collected in *Prismen* (1955). See 'Cultural Criticism and Society' in Th. W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 1981): 17–34 (34).
- ⁵⁵ 'The abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting; . . . Yet this suffering, what Hegel called consciousness of adversity, also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it; it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it.' Adorno, 'Commitment': 188.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid: 189.

- ⁵⁷ The label on the second image in *Occupations* reads ‘*Gehen auf Wasser. Versuch in der Badewanne zu Hause im Atelier*’. ‘Walking on water. An attempt in the bath at home in the studio.’ (my translation).
- ⁵⁸ Adorno, ‘Meaning’: 89.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid*: 89, 343 (fn 1).
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid*: 90.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid*: 89–90.
- ⁶² *Ibid*: 91. “‘And it’s as good as if it never happened’”. See also 344 (fn 9).
- ⁶³ *Ibid*: 344 (fn 11). The text is found in the first published version and the radio version.
- ⁶⁴ Mehring, ‘Continental Schrift’: 179.
- ⁶⁵ Mark Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer* (Chicago and Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1987): 17 and 156 (fn 15).
- ⁶⁶ In a 2012 interview with Tim Marlow, related to Kiefer’s exhibition *Let a thousand flowers bloom* (White Cube, Hong Kong (May–August 2012)), the artist demonstrates the difference between the Mao and the Hitler salutes. http://whitecube.com/channel/in_the_gallery_past/anselm_kiefer_let_a_thousand_flowers_bloom_hong_kong_2012/?lang=en (accessed 25 June 2015). Kiefer has said, in a 2014 interview with Tim Marlow at the Royal Academy, that he was inspired to make the Nazi salute, ‘die Hand zu heben’, after he found a record made by the post-war U.S occupying force to re-educate Germans. On it were included the voices of Goebbels, Goehring and Hitler. Kiefer says he was ‘intrigued and repulsed, shocked and fascinated’. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/5NTy5fTgm7JYYq6sRQM0SGp/a-anselm-kiefer-at-the-royal-academy> (accessed 25 June 2015).
- ⁶⁷ Adorno, ‘Meaning’: 98.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid*: 98.
- ⁶⁹ Kiefer, in various interviews, has said that he wore his father’s military clothes in *Occupations*. See, for example, an interview with Stephanie Marsh in *The Times Magazine*, 6 September, 2014: ‘Didn’t his father mind him wearing his old Wehrmacht uniform for *Occupations*? No, his father understood that this was performance art and “he was kind of proud that I was using his clothes”’, <https://www.gagosian.com/artists/anselm-kiefer/artist-press/> (accessed 25 June 2015).
- ⁷⁰ Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer*: 60. It was in fact Eric Santner who first made this observation. See Eric Santner, ‘The trouble with Hitler: post-war aesthetics and the legacy of fascism’ in *New German Critique*, vol. 57, 1992: 5–24 (23).
- ⁷¹ Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer*: 49.
- ⁷² *Ibid*: 141 (fn 3). She quotes from the memoir of Gabriele von Arnim, *Das grosse Schweigen: von der Schwierigkeit, mit den Schatten der Vergangenheit zu leben*, published in 1989.
- ⁷³ Alexander Mitscherlich (1908–1982) was a leading figure in the post-war revival of psychoanalysis after its suppression under National Socialism. With the encouragement of Adorno, Horkheimer and Georg August Zinn, he and his wife Margarete founded the Institute and Training Centre for Psychoanalysis and Psychosomatics in Frankfurt in 1959, with Mitscherlich as its director. It was renamed the Sigmund-Freud-Institut in 1964. From the

1960s, the Mitscherlichs played an important part in post-war Germany's intellectual debates, employing psychoanalytical ideas in an attempt at understanding the causes of Nazism and its aftermath in German society.

⁷⁴ Alexander Mitscherlich, *Auf dem Weg zur vaterlosen Gesellschaft* (Munich: Piper, 1963). Cited in Michael Schneider, 'Fathers and sons, retrospectively: the damaged relationship between two generations', trans. Jamie Owen Daniel in *New German Critique* 31 (Winter 1984): 3–51 (4).

⁷⁵ Schneider, 'Fathers and sons': 3–4.

⁷⁶ Ibid: 5.

⁷⁷ Adorno, 'Meaning': 102.

⁷⁸ Saltzman also comments on Kiefer's childlike and playful attitude in this work (Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer*: 56, 58).

⁷⁹ The title *Heroische Sinnbilder* is taken from an essay of that name in an issue of *Die Kunst im Deutschen Reich* 7(2) (February 1943). The issue begins and ends with photographs of Arno Breker sculptures and is filled with images, portraits, and texts extolling past 'heroism'. See Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer*: 147 (fn 18).

⁸⁰ The Berlin Schlossbrücke was built to Schinkel's design (1821–1824) and was one of the elements in Schinkel's plans for the redesign of Berlin. The bridge's statuary had been taken down for safe-keeping during World War II and, at the time of Kiefer's painting, was still out of view in storage; the bridge itself stood on the eastern part of a divided Berlin.

⁸¹ The relationship in scale between artist and monument is totally different from that in the *Occupations* photo taken in Montpellier, where, as noted, Kiefer is placed so that he is the same size as the equestrian statue of Louis XIV.

⁸² Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlichs' *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhalten* was published in Germany in 1967, and according to the preface to the English language edition, sold over 100,000 copies. It is likely that Kiefer would at the very least have been aware of the book. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behaviour* (New York: Grove Press, Inc, 1975).

⁸³ A. and M. Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*: 23.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Adorno, 'Education': 191.

⁸⁶ Adorno, 'Education': 192.

⁸⁷ Ibid: 198.

⁸⁸ Ibid: 192.

⁸⁹ Ibid: 195.

⁹⁰ Adorno, 'Meaning': 89.

⁹¹ Adorno, 'Education': 198.

⁹² Adorno, 'Meaning': 89–90.

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The Body of Ambivalence: The 'Alive, Yet Dead' Portrait in the Nineteenth Century*

Patrizia Munforte

Abstract

This paper is particularly concerned with 'alive, yet dead' portraits in the nineteenth century and how these images can invite specific readings. Extraordinary about this type of portrait photography is that it shows the dead sitter as a living person. The evidence of deadly signs on the body is hidden in a body of ambivalence – a body which fluctuates between a status of life and death. By examining particular cases of 'alive, yet dead' portraits, this paper will analyse aspects of temporal arrangements, visible and invisible signs in the image and how the bodies of evidence and ambivalence are constructed.

The Body of Evidence

'PM or not?' is one of the frequently asked questions on the Thanatos Archive of early post-mortem and memorial photography.¹ The abbreviation stands for 'post-mortem' and refers to one of the first and most popular photographic genres of the mid nineteenth century: so-called 'post-mortem photography', practised within occidental mourning and memorial traditions. Today the term generally describes a photographic portrait of the dead which was commissioned by the bereaved and provided solace during mourning.²

Between the 1840s and the 1870s, photographers primarily offered two different ways of taking portrait photographs of the deceased.³ The most widespread was the 'last sleep' portrait showing the deceased person apparently sleeping, corresponding to the Christian belief of peaceful and eternal rest. The 'alive, yet dead' portrait, on the other hand, depicts the

deceased, often in an upright position, with opened or closed eyes.⁴ In both cases the photographer had the task of concealing any signs of death as far as possible.

The Thanatos community gives special interest to 'alive, yet dead' and 'last sleep' portraits that are difficult to distinguish from those of the living: portraits which do not show any evidence of death, such as distortions or obvious lethal wounds. It could be – in fact, it is likely – that there are images of living persons in the collection. Thus, the online community provides arguments whether the sitter is alive or not, literally hunting for signs of mortality on the sitter's body. This way of reading the image uses the structure of forensic analysis, wherein it is necessary to ascertain what I will call the 'body of evidence'. Although this expression designates the entirety of the concrete proofs of how the sitter died, in this connection I use the term literally: the body of evidence is the corpse itself. In the question 'PM or not?', there is a premise that there is only one way to read and understand the image selected from two binary, mutually exclusive alternatives. This way of reading is ahistorical, however. In fact, the question is more about what today's viewer may see in these images than about reconstructing a historical context.

Two questions immediately arise: was it crucial in the early times of photography to evidence the nature of the image? Do we truly need to ask 'is the sitter alive or dead'? I would argue that the distinction does not matter. As American cultural historian Alan Trachtenberg emphasised in his seminal book *Reading American Photography*, the meaning of an image and its given

category change in the course of time. Trachtenberg points out: '[The photographs] may seem to offer solid evidence that objects and people exist, but do they guarantee what such things *mean*? [...] [W]hat an image shows depends on how and where and when, and by whom, it is seen [*italics in the original*].'⁵

Far more crucial is understanding how such images functioned in the occidental mourning and memorial traditions of the nineteenth century. In addition to this, I will show how the 'alive, yet dead' portrait generates for today's viewer an ambivalent reading, specifically when we know very little about the photograph's historical context. By begging the question of whether the portrayed person is dead or alive, the photographic portrait of the deceased invites an unreliable way of reading that relies on simple techniques and the staging of the dead as alive.

In order to examine the construction of the 'alive, yet dead' portrait, it is necessary to review the historical sources. As several written statements of the nineteenth century testify, photographers intended to generate an uncertain reading in the image. At the request of customers who desired a last portrait of the deceased as an apparently living sitter, photographers used strategies I shall refer to as 'the body of ambivalence', setting the deceased in a status between life and death. I consider the question of how the body of ambivalence is constructed, and how this may influence our perception, leading us to presume that there is a body of evidence.⁶

I will begin by charting the history and presenting the stakes at the heart of the 'alive, yet dead' portrait in the nineteenth century. Through the analysis of several case studies, I will show which various factors participate in challenging the beholder's perception in the 'alive, yet dead' portrait, focusing on the ambivalence inherent to the medium of photography – the illusion of an apparent immediacy to the subject presented – which calls the beholder's perception into question. In that regard I demonstrate that the arrangement of the body and the manipulation of the image also generate an ambivalent reaction in the beholder.

In order to get a closer reading of the images, I suggest applying Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart's method of analysing the photograph in terms of its materiality and social biography by understanding it 'as belonging in a continuing process of production, exchange, usage and meaning'.⁷ This understanding is shaped by (1) 'the plasticity of the image itself, its chemistry, the paper it is printed on, the toning [and] the resulting surface variations'; and (2) 'the presentational forms', i.e. the format of the photograph and the context in which it has been presented.⁸ I then conclusively investigate the technical strategies of mid-nineteenth-century Vienna photographer Albin Mutterer, who was well-known for his retouched portraits of the deceased. The analysis is based on a portrait of an editor called Reitmayer, currently thought to be an 'alive, yet dead' photograph. The case study aims at questioning the ambiguous written sources which are attached to the image but give rise to more questions than answers as to what, precisely, it depicts.

Picturing the Deceased in the Nineteenth Century

Taking private portraits of the deceased was a socially accepted and a widespread photographic practice in Europe and North America from 1840 up to the 1900s. Although they were popular, these portraits were meant as a final – sometimes as the sole – visual remembrance and were presented only in private, familiar circles and exposed to an intimate and privy gaze.⁹ Portrait photography of the deceased is based on the custom of private mortuary portraiture that first emerged in Flanders in the late fifteenth century, which quickly spread through northern Europe and was also cultivated simultaneously with photography in the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Although the mechanical medium claimed a new way of seeing, early photographic techniques followed long-established painterly patterns, imitating the patina of painting to the point where the photographic image disappeared behind the overpainting entirely.¹¹ Photography's success was also a consequence of the relatively low production cost; contrary to painting, it was affordable for working-class families. In order to achieve a successful portrait of the deceased, it was necessary for photographers to represent the lifeless body in such a way that the person seemed to be in a living and 'natural position'.¹²

The difficulty of the task was a recurring theme in photographic journals. As British photographer Joseph Hubert discussed in his 1887 article 'Can Photography Lie?', there was the 'necessity' of 'correcting' the sitter's cadaverous features or manipulating the photograph of the deceased, as the 'horrible truth' of death had to be concealed: the bereaved should remember

the deceased without being reminded of the facticity of death.¹³ Displaying any distortion of the body would mean – according to Christian belief – that the deceased did not find peace, but instead would continue to suffer after death.¹⁴

In *The Photographic and Fine Art Journal* from 1855, an anonymous writer reports on a photo of a deceased boy who was photographed in a way that expressed freshness and vivacity:

Life from the Dead. – We have been shown a daguerreotype likeness of a little boy, the son of Thomas Dorwin, taken after his decease, by Mr. Barnard, of the firm Barnard & Nichols. It has not the slightest expression of suffering, and nothing of that ghastliness and rigidity [sic] of outline and feature which usually render likenesses taken in sickness or after death so painfully revolting as to make them decidedly undesirable. On the other hand it has all the freshness and vivacity of a picture from a living original – the sweet composure – the serene and happy look of childhood. Even the eyes, incredible as it may seem, are not expressionless, but so natural that no one would imagine it could be a post mortem [sic] execution. This is another triumph of this wonderful art. How sublime the thought that man, by a simple process, can constrain the light of heaven to catch and fix the fleeting shadow of life, even as it lingers upon the pallid features of death.
Hail glorious light that thus can timely save
The beauty of our loved ones from the grave!¹⁵

This description testifies how crucial it was that the beholder saw the deceased as alive: the unknown writer praises the ambivalent perception of the photograph, observing the medium's capacity to level the boundaries between the deceased and the living and, thereby, to turn the fact of death into a fiction of life. Also noteworthy in this report is his use of the expression 'fleeting shadow': 'Secure the shadow 'ere the substance fade / Let Nature imitate what Nature made' was one of the most popular American advertising slogans of photography.¹⁶ The advertisement is a memento mori, reminding

the customers not only to take a picture before life ends ('ere the substance fade'), but also to take a picture of their beloved deceased before they completely disappear.

The inventor of the *carte de visite*, André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, who was famous for his portraits of well-known figures in Parisian high society, took pictures of the deceased, although not without a feeling of unease.¹⁷ In his book *Renseignements photographiques*, Disdéri writes about his experience:

Each time we were called to do a portrait after death, we dressed the deceased in the clothes he usually wore. We recommended leaving the eyes open; we sat him near a table, and waited seven or eight hours before proceeding. In this way we would seize the moment when the contractions of rigor mortis disappeared [and] we were able to reproduce the appearance of life. This is the only way to have a suitable portrait that does not remind the one to whom he is so beloved, the painful moment that took him away.¹⁸

In addition to staging the deceased sitter to appear alive, it was also important to render a resemblance. As Disdéri wrote, the time span for taking pictures was fixed, limited by the end of rigor mortis and the imminent putrefaction of the corpse.

According to Disdéri and the anonymous American writer, it was preferable to take pictures of the dead in an ambivalent posture in order that the bereaved could console themselves by seeing the deceased as if she/he were still alive. There were, however, photographers who followed these rules without attributing any illusionistic quality to the image. The American photographer Nathan G. Burgess, for instance, was an expert in taking portrait photographs of the dead. In an article entitled 'Taking Photographs after Death', Burgess

describes how the deceased should be staged and portrayed. Although he instructs the reader not to stage the body in a setting referring to death, such as a casket, he remarks that 'all likeness taken after death will of course only resemble the inanimate body, nor will there appear in the portrait anything like life itself'.¹⁹ For Burgess, the cadaverous signs cannot be eliminated entirely, except in the case of little children, because, he suggests, they could smile peacefully and lifelike in the photograph.²⁰ Echoing Disdéri's statement about the importance of the resemblance, Burgess discusses how photographers struggled with the expression of the deceased because it was not possible to either control or influence their face. However, a few photographers focused on techniques to improve the facial expression since, 'This gave the portrait [of a deceased] its moral and spiritual dimension.'²¹ As a comparison of the different statements shows, not all photographers agreed that the dead could be staged in a lifelike way. Nonetheless, dramatising the deceased as alive was viewed as important.

The Body of Ambivalence

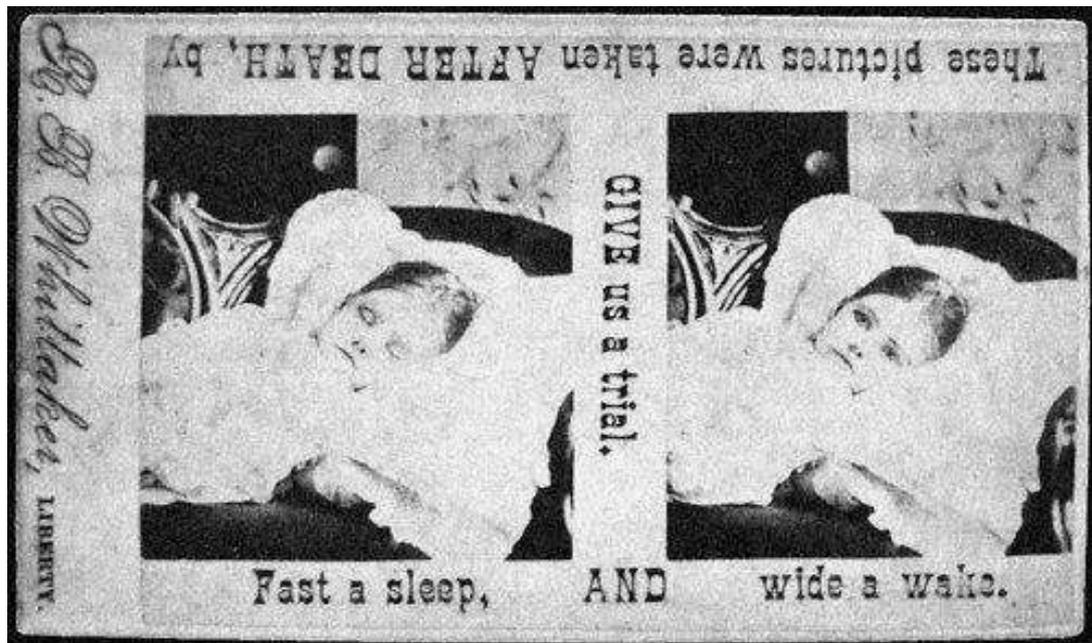


Fig. 1: R. B. Whittaker, *Fast Asleep and Wide Awake*, 1860s, retouched stereograph. From Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty II: Grief, Bereavement and the Family in Memorial Photography* (New York: Burns Archive Press, 2002), n. p.

We have seen that the ‘alive, yet dead’ portrait depicts a deceased person in an everyday situation: the corpse is staged ‘in a natural posture’, with the eyes making a lifelike impression that imitates portraits of the living.²² But it is not always necessary to stage the dead body in an upright position or with open eyes. A photograph by R. B. Whittaker, from Liberty, New York, shows two images of the same girl resting on a sofa and reclining on a pillow [fig. 1]. In the background there is wallpaper with a flower pattern. The anonymous girl is in some sort of domestic interior space, portrayed in two ways: in the first (left-side) image, her eyes are closed; in the second (right-side) image, she is looking directly at the viewer. Writing below the pictures suggests that the girl on the left is ‘fast a sleep’, whereas on the right side she is ‘wide

awake'. The upside-down inscription, 'These pictures were taken AFTER DEATH', clarifies the nature of both photographs.

The format of the image reveals that this is a stereograph. However, a stereo card displays two almost identical images, each taken from a slightly different angle. With the aid of a stereoscope, the human eye merges the two images into one picture, which in turn is perceived as three-dimensional space. Although Whittaker's two photographs are not identical, both depicted initially the ostensibly deceased girl with her eyes closed. As a matter of fact, the photographer manipulated the right-side image by drawing in the girl's eyes. As a consequence of this trick, the stereograph does not realise a spatial and physical closeness to the child, but rather a temporal displacement that reverses the fact of death into the fiction of life. By making use of temporal displacement, Whittaker employs narrative as a stylistic device in the image, foregoing the illusion of three-dimensional space to create a before-and-after photo that, by reading the image from left to right, gives an impression of movement which coincides with a temporal dimension: the dead girl wakes from eternal sleep. Whittaker created an advertising gimmick by simply retouching the eyes with a pencil. The photograph is aimed at the customer, who must be convinced of Whittaker's artistic talent. The interaction of the viewer is important also because she/he is involved in this game of arranging the images into a sequence. At the same time, Whittaker creates a guessing game by asking whether the girl is alive or not, and in this way generates a body of ambivalence by means of a specific reading from left to right. However, the viewer is not supposed to uncover the manipulation by himself;

instead, it is the photographer who explains that the image has been manipulated, thus revealing the body of evidence and publicising his mastery of the artistic skills needed to create the illusion.

The American photographer's use of a stereograph to advertise his services is thoroughly inventive, but it was not extraordinary in the nineteenth century. Successful portrait photographs of the deceased were generally displayed in showcases of a photographer's studio.²³ Hence, the manner in which Whittaker staged the girl was not a particularly macabre way to advertise his services. On the contrary, this work testifies that such portraits were common and in great demand in the mid nineteenth century.

For our second example, let us turn to the French photographer A. Poton, who also employed the stylistic device of temporal shifts. A portrait taken in 1852 shows an elderly woman in a mountain landscape under the crescent moonlight [fig. 2]. On her lap lies a book, in which she has stuck her left thumb. She has closed her eyes, which may indicate inner reflection amidst nature. The woman's pose and her apparent familiarity with the landscape suggest that she frequents this place regularly. But closer inspection reveals that the image is a collage, consisting of a lithograph (the landscape) and two colourised photographs [fig. 3]. Whereas the head is cut from a 'last sleep' portrait, the sitting body is a cut-out from a conventional studio portrait of a woman who is most probably alive. Even though it was a common practice to place the deceased in an upright position, in the majority of cases the corpse had to lean on a backrest, sometimes held by a belt at the chest, in order that

the corpse did not slump down or fall from the chair. Since the body in this example maintains a straight and stable posture without leaning on a back of a chair, we can assume that the cut-out of the body came from a portrait of a living woman.



Fig. 2: A. Poton, Portrait of a Woman in a Landscape, ca. 1852, collage of lithograph and hand-coloured salted paper print, 24 x 17 cm. Collection Lightmotif, Geneva.

© Collection Lightmotif



Fig. 3: A. Poton, Portrait of a Woman in a Landscape (detail of fig. 2), ca. 1852. Collection Lightmotif, Geneva. © Collection Lightmotif

Although the face is usually the centre of a portrait, in this particular image the upright body has more relevance because it transforms the image into an 'alive, yet dead' portrait.²⁴ The posture of the body, for example, signals that the woman is living, but her closed eyes suggest that she is not entirely present, which is rather unusual for traditional portraiture. Particularly because of the closed eyes, art historian Anton Pigler states that portraiture after death has limited artistic value as the sitter rejects the communication with the beholder.²⁵ British art historian Shearer West disagrees with this characterisation, and points to the individualised traits in the portrait of the dead in European funeral sculptures as well as painting and graphic arts since

the late Middle Ages.²⁶ Although closed eyes – a sign for the demise of the sitter – reject a relationship to the viewer, they do not make the posthumous portrait a misrepresentation. Far more crucial is that the photograph shows the deceased as she/he appeared during lifetime. As with a portrait of the living, the bereaved recognises the sitter by facial expression and her/his characteristic and individual pose.²⁷ Moreover, a portrait of the dead literally manifests the wish to overcome death. As West has stated, ‘A portrait could bring the dead back to life and appear to provide both a trace of a body and a stimulus to memory.’²⁸ In this sense, the photographic portrait of the dead is crucial for Western memorial and material culture: it embodies the deceased person as a physical substitute.²⁹

As shown in both examples, the photographers worked with the stylistic device of temporal shifts so that they could ‘resurrect’ the deceased in the image. The photographers also took advantage of the medium’s strength, which consists in reproducing the exact facial features of the sitter as well as in preserving the traces of a past presence. In this sense French film critic and theorist André Bazin also noted that the ‘practice of embalming the dead’ is done to overcome time and hence the physical decay after death. ‘Photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption’.³⁰

'PM or Not?': The Reitmayer Case

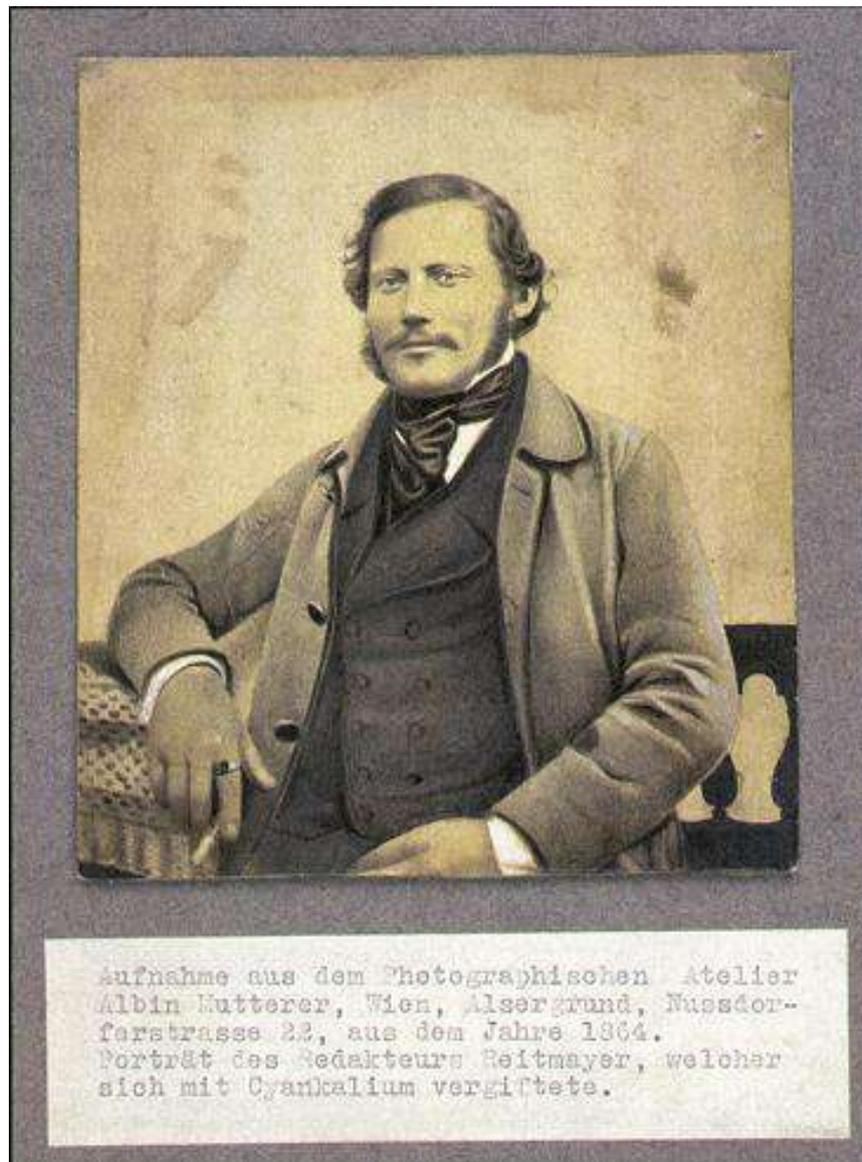


Fig. 4: Albin Mütterer, Portrait of the editor Reitmayer who poisoned himself with potassium cyanide, 1864, salted paper print with Indian ink and opaque white, 12.3 x 10.9 cm.
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This case study takes a closer look at a Viennese portrait which is nowadays considered an 'alive, yet dead' photograph.³¹ The focus here is not on the identification of a type of picture. Instead it is a question of analysing 'alive, yet dead' photography from a new vantage point by taking a closer look at the

photograph itself. Moreover, the case study illustrates how categorising the 'alive, yet dead' portrait restricts our way of reading the image, which consequently leads to a decontextualisation of its original meaning and purpose.

In the field of posthumous photographic portraiture in German- and English-speaking areas, there is one photographer who stands out: Albin Mutterer (1806–1873), whose photographs of the deceased are now considered unique because of their extraordinary appearance.³² Mutterer, originally from Bad Krozingen in the Black Forest, was a shoe-cream producer who moved to Vienna and opened a photo studio in 1848, where he practised until his death in 1873. He quickly became famous for portraying members of Viennese bourgeois society and taking pictures of the dead.³³

One of the German photographer's most eccentric images is the half-figure salt print portrait of an editor named Reitmayer [fig. 4] – a portrait currently categorised in photography research as an 'alive, yet dead' photograph. The eccentricity is due to the odd appearance of the dead sitter, who seems vitally alive. With his right arm placed on a tablecloth next to him, Reitmayer holds a cigarette in his right hand between his forefinger and middle finger and looks straight ahead with an astute smile at the beholder. In the background on the right-hand side, one sees the outline of a balustrade, a standard component in Mutterer's studio photographs. The typewritten text below the photograph states that the photograph was shot in Albin Mutterer's photo studio in 1864. The text also specifies that it is the 'portrait of the editor Reitmayer, who

poisoned himself with potassium cyanide'.³⁴ Especially on the grounds of the typewritten document, photo historians assume that Reitmayer was dead at the time the image was taken. Art historian Felix Hoffmann, for instance, states that '[T]he caption on the front and on the back [reveals] that the editor Reitmayer photographed here poisoned himself before the image was taken'.³⁵ However, the explanatory note does not actually confirm that the sitter was dead. It seems that this way of reading gives primacy to the text in interpreting the photograph, thus reducing the photographic object to an illustration of this textual information. Of course, the assumption that it might be a post-mortem portrait is closely related to the fact that Albin Mutterer was well-known for taking pictures of the dead; nonetheless, this does not constitute a clear argument that Reitmayer's picture was taken after his death.³⁶

A discrepancy of dates has further complicated the reception history of the portrait.³⁷ While the inscription on the front of the portrait bears the date 1864, the year stated on the back is 1846. Since Mutterer worked with daguerreotypes in the mid-1840s, it can be assumed that he did not make the salt print in 1846.³⁸ As for the year indicated on the front of the picture, the German art historian Katharina Sykora has suggested that it corresponds to the first Viennese photographic exhibition in 1864, organised by the Photographische Gesellschaft (Photographic Society in Vienna), in which Albin Mutterer participated.³⁹ In an article on the exhibition in the *Wiener Zeitung*, Mutterer is mentioned as the 'Leichenphotograph'⁴⁰ (photographer of corpses) who displayed 'several funeral monuments, corpses, the old

dissection room of the Allgemeine Krankenhaus, and appropriate pleasant objects'.⁴¹

According to Alfred Wolf, Mutterer promoted his artistic skill in taking pictures of the deceased as 'the dead retouched as alive'.⁴² But the article from 1864 does not explicitly state that the photographer was famous for 'alive, yet dead' portraits. The catalogue of the exhibition only records that Mutterer showed a photograph of the deceased Karl II Borromäus Philipp Prince of Schwarzenberg. However, this image is most likely not an 'alive, yet dead' picture, as political figures were in those days traditionally photographed lying down and with their eyes closed. By looking at the listing of Mutterer's exhibits, it is striking that all salted paper and albumen prints have a specific title, but only one is listed as 'a portrait'.⁴³ Nevertheless, the question whether it is Reitmayer's 'alive, yet dead' portrait cannot be answered.

In order to achieve a more detailed reading of the Reitmayer portrait I suggest using the text as a secondary – and therefore the image as the primary – source. As previously mentioned, Mutterer was well known for his portraits of Vienna's affluent society. As a member of it, Reitmayer was among Mutterer's first customers; he photographed the editor early in his career in the 1840s [fig. 5]. The most interesting aspect of this portrait daguerreotype of Reitmayer is that it displays a striking resemblance to the alleged post-mortem image.



Fig. 5: Albin Mutterer, Portrait of the Editor Reitmayer, 1840s, daguerreotype, 8 x 6.5 cm.
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Even though the images are mirror-inverted, the similarities between the two portraits are remarkable. In the same manner as in the photograph of 1864, the young editor is turned slightly diagonally to the right, sitting next to a covered table with his top hat and with his left arm on it. In this picture, too, the editor holds a cigarillo between the forefinger and middle finger, but this

time he holds it with his left hand. In contrast to the later image, however, the portrayed person looks more tense when it comes to his posture and facial expression. But why did Mutterer photograph the editor in the same way after a twenty-year interval? If we assume that Reitmayer's portrait of 1864 was taken immediately after his suicide, one of the explanations could be that Mutterer used the earlier portrait of the editor as a reference to position Reitmayer's corpse. On the other hand, the portrait could have been taken during Reitmayer's lifetime and functioned as a mourning image. In fact, in the 1860s, it was common to use a portrait that was taken during one's life as a memorial image.⁴⁴

As there is a lack of substantial facts regarding this, the image should be analysed in order to gain further information. When considering that a daguerreotype is in most cases a mirror-inverted picture, the resemblance is even more striking [fig. 6]. By flipping the older image horizontally and placing it as a transparent slide on the younger picture, it becomes evident, that the images are almost identical [fig. 7]: the nose, ears and parting of the hair lie on the exact same line.



Fig. 6: Albin Mutterer, left: Portrait daguerreotype of the editor Reitmayer flipped horizontally; right: Salt-print portrait of Reitmayer (detail of fig. 4). © Albertina, Vienna – On permanent loan from the Höhere Graphische Bundes-, Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt, Vienna. www.albertina.at



Fig. 7: By flipping the daguerreotype portrait horizontally and placing it as a transparent slide on the photograph of 1864, it becomes evident, that the images are almost identical.

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The more recent image shows an older and burlier Reitmayer; however, the impression is deceiving: the salt print was excessively retouched with Indian ink and opaque white, visible most clearly in the distortion of perspective that is noticeable on the waistcoat and the proportions of the body, especially the irregular circumference of the arms. The intervention into the photograph is also shown by the hanging right hand and the loose position of the cigarette. Yet, with the exception of the position of the hanging hand, the pose is almost identical. Moreover, by manipulating the hand, Mutterer intended to obscure the newer image's similarity to the older one. It is due to these discrepancies that it can be assumed that Albin Mutterer first photographed the older image, then used the negative to make an enlarged print of only the head and shoulders, whereupon he finally drew in the body and the props onto the salt print. The 1864 photograph is a reprint of the earlier daguerreotype; the man in the portrait, previously assumed to be a corpse propped before the camera, is actually alive. Mutterer created a fictitious portrait that was retouched so heavily that the 1840s prototype could hardly be recognised. Moreover, he levelled the boundaries between artistic means and photographic material evidence, bringing the oscillation of fact and fiction onto an entirely different level. This interpretation could also solve the mystery of the date on the back of the photograph. '1846' could well be a typographical error. Alternatively, it could indicate the year of the portrait daguerreotype.

Was this photograph embedded in the context of mourning? Who commissioned this portrait? What was their intention? It is indisputable that

the portrait is a representation of a public figure who seems to have been an important customer of Albin Mutterer, since he made an elaborate salted paper print of the daguerreotype. But precisely on the grounds of these facts, the question arises whether Mutterer showed Reitmayer's portrait at the 1864 exhibition, while pointing out that the editor committed suicide. It is possible the note was an aide-mémoire for someone who wished to remember the sitter's identity and the tragic circumstances of his death.

Connecting with the tradition of 'alive, yet dead' photography, the portrait of Reitmayer is nowadays constructed around several ambivalent aspects. Although not explicitly stated, the dramatic text positions the subject within a mythical context. In this case, the myth is generated due to the lack of information on the specific context in which the image was taken.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, with this approach we lose sight of the actual subject of the research, i.e. the image itself.

Since Reitmayer's 1864 portrait is a reprint of the original daguerreotype, manipulated until it almost vanished, we can assume that he was not physically available when the image was made. In this sense, he may also be considered more absent than factually dead. On the other hand, he is also a revenant – a departed coming back into the everyday life of those he left behind. With this in mind, we must revise the categorisation of this image from an 'alive, yet dead' photograph to a portrait literally made posthumously. Mutterer's role also shifts within the Austrian history of photography from an

'alive, yet dead' portraitist to an innovative photographer who knew how to take advantage of the manipulative and creative capacities of the medium.⁴⁶

In summary the case study about Reitmayer's portrait became an investigation of the technical and artistic skills of Albin Mutterer. Although the main question about the portrait's purpose remains open, Reitmayer's portrait is still embedded in the tradition of remembering the absent sitter.

Conclusion

The 'alive, yet dead' portraiture conceals the evident signs of mortality: death is obscured by manipulating the picture and by staging the body in a lifelike posture. This type of portrait photography plays with the perception of the beholder who is seeking evident traces even though they might be based on the grounds of ambiguous signs.

This paper suggested that an exploratory reading is probably the best approach to the ambivalent and uncertain qualities of 'alive, yet dead' portraits that act with the potentials and limitations of the photographic medium in the mid nineteenth century. My analysis focused on the manipulation of images and clarified the necessity to work closely with the material in order to focus on how the images basically functioned, especially because the photographic 'alive, yet dead' portrait operates with specific stylistic devices to affect our usual gaze patterns. Written statements of the nineteenth century also testified that the photographer had to create an illusionistic picture.

Nineteenth-century mourners rejected a picture that showed evidence of death – indeed, they literally requested to see an ambivalent body. The ‘alive, yet dead’ portrait sought to satisfy the desire of the bereaved to find solace in the serene traits of the sitter.

As the Whittaker and the Poton portraits showed, one of the most important strategies for the posthumous portrait was temporal displacement. While the American photographer used a simple technique by retouching the eyes of the deceased girl, Poton made a photographic collage of a living body and the head of a dead woman. Both images demonstrated that in reversing the temporal orders in the image the photographer could bring the dead back to life. Albin Mutterer’s portrait of the editor Reitmayer demonstrated how the identity and function of a photographic portrait can be obscured by ambiguous written statements. In considering these facts, we have to examine the material source so that we can extract more information. My approach compared two portraits of Reitmayer made twenty years apart. In doing so, I was able to clarify that the 1864 photograph of the apparently deceased Reitmayer was a new print of an earlier portrait from the 1840s. The case study showed paradigmatically that classifying the portrait as posthumous misleads the reading of the image. Ultimately the image still remains embedded in the context of memorial culture. The question ‘pm or not’ is not relevant; instead, we should think about the ‘alive, yet dead’ photograph in its working process, which induces an uncertain, ambivalent legibility. Moreover, I wish to initiate a critical reflection on the category of the ‘alive, yet dead’ portrait: early post-mortem portraits should be viewed in a more differentiated

manner through re-reading and comprehending the complexity of their memorial functions and their material culture. A death portrait is not necessarily a portrait of a corpse; as the case studies demonstrated, it can be a far more complex, multilayered image which presents the deceased not only through an appearance of life and resemblance of the sitter but also through the material, haptic quality and photographic techniques.

Endnotes

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¹ See <http://www.thanatos.net> (accessed 7 July 2015).

² See Dan Meinwald, *Memento Mori: Death in Nineteenth Century Photography* (Riverside: California Museum of Photography, 1990); David Stannard, 'Sex, Death, and Daguerreotypes: Toward an Understanding of Image as Elegy', in John Wood (ed.), *America and the Daguerreotype* (Iowa City: University Press of Iowa, 1991): 73–108; Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995); Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2004); Audrey Linkman, 'Taken from Life: Post-Mortem Portraiture in Britain 1860–1910', in *History of Photography* vol. 30, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 309–347; Katharina Sykora, *Die Tode der Fotografie: Totenfotografie und ihr sozialer Gebrauch*, vol. 1 (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2009).

³ Mike Jacob, 'Part 2: Death and Photography in the Nineteenth Century', in *Photographica World* 79 (December 1996): 21–23.

⁴ Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*: 52–103.

The terms 'last sleep' and 'alive, yet dead' were shaped by the American anthropologist Jay Ruby and are two of the three styles of representing the deceased in the nineteenth century. The third is 'funeral photography' that shows the dead person in a coffin, thus providing evidence of the death of the person by depicting the particular funeral or burial rite. *Ibid.*: 75–77.

⁵ Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History; Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989): 19–20.

⁶ Upon closer consideration of the term 'alive, yet dead', a certain element of ambiguity becomes evident. Hence, I also pursue the question of whether the term can be used as a generic term for the category 'last sleep'. The state of being alive is also shown in the depiction of sleep. Jay Ruby views both the 'last sleep' and 'alive, yet dead' as post-mortem photography. However, 'post-mortem photography' is problematic because it describes not a specific portrait but all death images, generally including pathological and crime photography. Furthermore, the genre 'post-mortem photography' needs to be reconsidered because the technical term has different meanings and therefore contributes to the confusion over the genre. Since this discussion would go beyond the scope of this paper, I will consider it for future research.

⁷ Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004): 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 3.

⁹ Stannard, 'Sex, Death, and Daguerreotypes': 95–98.

¹⁰ Anton Pigler, 'Portraying the Dead: Painting – Graphic Art', in Lajos Fülep (ed.), *Acta Historiae Artium. Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, vol. 4 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1956): 1–75.

¹¹ See for example Heinz K. Henisch and Bridget A. Henisch, *The Painted Photograph, 1839–1914* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University

Press, 1996); Robin Jaffee Frank, *Love and Loss: American Portrait and Mourning Miniatures* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 2000): 276–303.

¹² John L. Gihon and Albert S. Southworth use the expressions ‘natural position’ and ‘natural way’ when referring to the importance of staging the deceased in a naturalistic, casual pose. John L. Gihon, ‘Curious Photographic Experiences’, in *The Philadelphia Photographer* vol. 8, no. 95 (November 1871): 351; Albert Sands Southworth in the panel discussion ‘Posing, Lighting, and Expression’, in *The Philadelphia Photographer* vol. 10, no. 117 (September 1873): 282.

¹³ J. Hubert, ‘Can Photography Lie?’, in *The British Journal of Photography* vol. 34, no. 1393, Part 1 (14 January 1887): 23–24; J. Hubert, ‘Can Photography Lie?’, in *The British Journal of Photography* vol. 34, no. 1394, Part 2 (21 January 1887): 40.

¹⁴ Sykora, *Die Tode*: 64–67.

¹⁵ Anonymous, ‘Life from the Dead’, in *The Photographic and Fine Art Journal* vol. 8 (July 1855): 224.

¹⁶ Quoted without citation of the source in Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982): 32.

¹⁷ André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, *Renseignements photographiques indispensables à tous* (Paris: Gaittet, 1855): 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 25–26. ‘Chaque fois que nous avons été appelé à faire un portrait après décès, nous avons vêtu le mort des habits qu’il portait habituellement. Nous avons recommandé qu’on lui laissât les yeux ouverts, nous l’avons assis près d’une table, et pour opérer, nous avons attendu sept ou huit heures. De cette façon nous avons pu saisir le moment où [sic] les contractions de l’agonie disparaissant, il nous était donné de reproduire une apparence de vie. C’est le seul moyen d’obtenir un portrait convenable, et qui ne rappelle pas à la personne pour laquelle il est cher, le moment si douloureux qui lui a enlevé ce qu’elle aimait.’ All translations are the author’s own unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁹ Nathan G. Burgess, ‘Taking Portraits after Death’, in *The Photographic and Fine Art Journal* vol. 8, no. 3 (March 1855): 80.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Linkman, ‘Taken from Life’: 322.

²² Displaying the dead with open eyes and setting her/him in a lifelike pose was more popular in America and Continental Europe than in Great Britain. In Victorian Britain, the dead were not supposed to be touched on account of a superstitious belief that one could disturb the deceased and induce him/her to come back as a revenant. Whereas several articles in America explained how to set a corpse in an ‘animated’ pose, in Great Britain few articles about ‘alive, yet dead’ portraits were published. Sometimes American articles were reprinted with the intention to foster transatlantic exchange between specialists. See Linkman, ‘Taken from Life’: 310.

²³ *Ibid.*: 315.

²⁴ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991): 10.

²⁵ Pigler, ‘Portraying the Dead’: 2.

²⁶ Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 64.

²⁷ Linkman, 'Taken from Life': 321–322.

²⁸ West, *Portraiture*: 65.

²⁹ Batchen, *Forget Me Not*: 14.

³⁰ André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', trans. Hugh Gray, in *Film Quarterly* vol. 13, no. 4 (Summer 1960): 4; 8.

³¹ See Felix Hoffmann, 'Fotografie und Tod: Distributions- und Fetischisierungsformen der Leidenschaft – Kompensation einer Emotion', in Katharina Sykora, Ludger Derenthal and Esther Ruelfs (eds), *Fotografische Leidenschaften* (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 2006): 87–100; Sykora, *Die Tode*: 109–115.

³² Alfred Wolf, 'Albin und Josef Mutterer: Vater und Sohn als Wegbereiter der Photographie', in *Das Heimatmuseum Alsergrund* vol. 30, no. 121 (November 1989): 9. Albin Mutterer's year of birth is quoted differently in the research literature. While Austrian photo-historian Timm Starl (idem, *Lexikon zur Fotografie in Österreich 1839 bis 1945* [Vienna: Album Verlag, 2005]: 339) states that Mutterer was born in 1826, Alfred Wolf indicates the year 1806. However, the *Wiener Zeitung* reported on 8 July 1873 that Mutterer died at the age of 67 which confirms Wolf's assumption that Mutterer was born in 1806. 'Verstorbene', in *Wiener Zeitung* no. 157 (8 July 1873): 1240.

Regarding the extraordinary appearance of the images, see Hensch and Hensch, *Painted Photograph*: 193–194; 198; Hoffmann, 'Fotografie und Tod': 87–100; Sykora, *Die Tode*: 113–115; Audrey Linkman, *Photography and Death* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011): 29.

³³ Wolf, 'Albin und Josef Mutterer': 8–9; Starl, *Lexikon*: 339.

³⁴ 'Porträt des Redakteurs Reitmayer, welcher sich mit Cyancalium vergiftete'.

³⁵ '[D]ie vorder- und rückseitige Beschriftung [verrät], dass sich der hier fotografierte Redakteur Reitmayer vor der Aufnahme mit Zyankali vergiftet hatte.' Hoffmann, 'Fotografie und Tod': 91. Also Katharina Sykora presumes from the caption that the photograph was taken immediately after his suicide. Sykora, *Die Tode*: 113. Moreover, art historian Steffen Siegel deduces from his analysis that Reitmayer had committed suicide the day before the image was taken. Steffen Siegel, 'Das Porträt des Redakteurs Reitmayer' (review for Katharina Sykora's book *Die Tode der Fotografie*), in: <http://www.taz.de/1/archiv/digitaz/artikel/?ressort=ku&dig=2010%2F02%2F02%2Fa0033&cHash=fd8670edc> (accessed 22 May 2015).

³⁶ Wolf, 'Albin und Josef Mutterer': 9; Heinz Riedel, "'Tote retuschiert wie lebend": Albin Mutterer, der Leichenporträtist vom Thury-Grund', in *Wiener Geschichtsblätter* vol. 51, no. 2 (1996): 115–118.

³⁷ Sykora, *Die Tode*: 550.

³⁸ Wolf, 'Albin und Josef Mutterer': 7; Starl, *Lexikon*: 339.

³⁹ Sykora, *Die Tode*: 550. The Photographische Gesellschaft was founded in 1861 as the first German-language photographic society. Albin Mutterer was a member since the beginning.

⁴⁰ Anonymous, 'Die photographische Ausstellung', in *Wiener Zeitung* no. 118 (25 May 1864): 475.

⁴¹ Ibid. 'Mutterer [zeigte] eine Anzahl von Grabmonumenten, Leichen, die alte Secierkammer des allgemeinen Krankenhauses und entsprechende freundliche Gegenstände'.

⁴² Unfortunately Wolf does not indicate the source of Mutterer's slogan. Wolf, 'Albin und Josef Mutterer': 9; 11.

⁴³ Die photographische Gesellschaft, *Erste photographische Ausstellung in Wien* (Vienna: Selbstverlag der photographischen Gesellschaft, 1864): 26.

⁴⁴ See for example Batchen, *Forget Me Not*.

⁴⁵ Unfortunately, there is no further information on Reitmayer's identity. During my research, the main difficulty in obtaining more information was the missing information about Reitmayer's first name. I have established that he is not listed in the first address book for Vienna, Adolph Lehmann's *Allgemeiner Wohnungsanzeiger*. The book registered a person's last name as well as his occupation, and there is no record of an editor named Reitmayer. At this point, two explanations can be considered: either Reitmayer was not from Vienna, or he died before 1859, the year Lehmann's address book was founded. Research of the Viennese obituary columns also did not bring any results. See Lehmann's *Allgemeiner Wohnungsanzeiger*: <http://www.digital.wienbibliothek.at/nav/classification/2609> (accessed 7 January 2015). Alternative spellings of the family name were also considered and not found.

See also the obituary website Familia Austria, http://www.familia-austria.at/wienerzeitung/wz_daten.php (accessed 7 January 2015).

⁴⁶ Within research literature, Albin Mutterer is famous for his coloured and retouched photographs, but not for the print processes used in Reitmayer's portrait. Robert Zahlbrecht, *Die historischen Sammlungen der Graphischen Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt* (Vienna: Graphische Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt, 1963): 14; Wolf, 'Albin und Josef Mutterer': 8–9; Hensch and Hensch, *Painted Photograph*: 193–194; Starl, *Lexikon*: 339.

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SIN (without): The Alienated Spectator

SIN

Laboratorio Arte Alameda, Mexico City

20 June — 1 September 2013

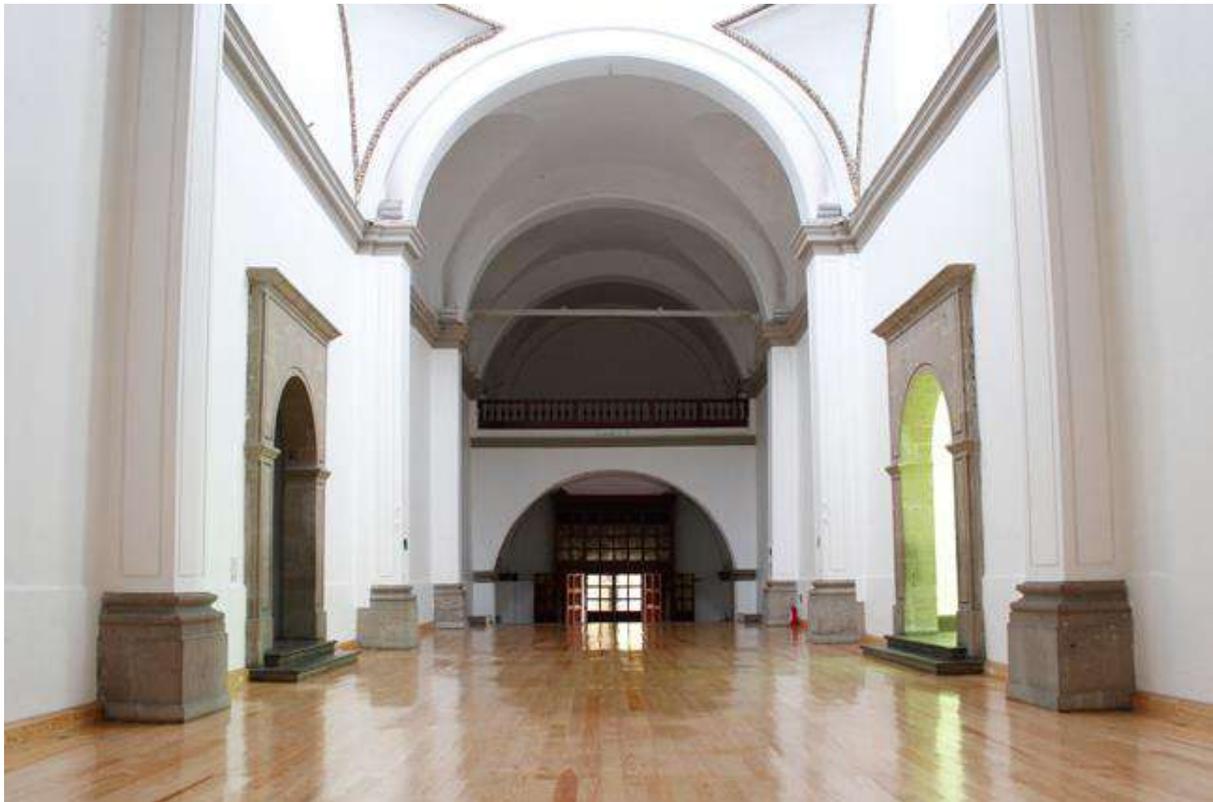


Fig. 1: SIN, Laboratorio Arte Alameda, Mexico City, 2013. Exhibition view. © Mario de Vega 2015.

SIN [fig. 1], curated by Carsten Seiffarth, presented the commissioned works of Mexican artist Mario de Vega at the Laboratorio Arte Alameda in Mexico City. The Laboratorio Arte Alameda was originally a sixteenth-century church at the former Convent of San Diego. In 2000, it was transformed into a place dedicated to contemporary art and technology, while conserving the original structure of the church. This review aims at highlighting what this exhibition brought to the table in terms of contemporary art and its audience. In particular, I will discuss its critical

impact on contemporary spectatorship and curatorial practices in ways that differ from the dominant discourse in these fields.

As suggested by its title, which means 'without' in Spanish, the exhibition started with an almost empty space. Right in the atrium of the church there was a 600-kilogram bell cast in bronze, which was buried on site after the closing of the exhibition. The only evidence of its existence is a text installed close to a plaque that marks the place as a former site of the Mexican Inquisition. Other objects were shown in the main exhibition space. However, these objects operated solely as what I call *visible facilitators*, as they only enabled the display of a work made up of invisible elements. In other words, these visible facilitators allowed the work to occur inside the spectator's body. This manifested itself via a physical estrangement that occurred as one entered the nave of the church. A special vibration between the head, the heart and the stomach area affected visitors in relation to the empty space. It was an acoustic pressure generated by an electro-mechanical system with 16000-watt capacity, utilising just a quarter of its power. The visitors were expected to walk through the empty space, which led to the lateral halls. Both halls worked with inaudible ultrasound produced either by the artist's electric installations or electromagnetic waves, becoming a site for the physical estrangement and the alienation of the body.

SIN explored the value of human vulnerability and confronted the visitors with the limits of their own perception.¹ 'I visit SIN under my own risk', claims the letter of acceptance of responsibility to be read and signed by all the visitors before

accessing the space. 'I declare that I have read and understood all the information relating to the exhibition and that I do not suffer from: high or low blood pressure, epilepsy, migraines, heart problems, hypersensibility, anxiety, have not recently undergone surgery...'.² Moreover, the text explains that the exhibition is not suitable for infants, pregnant women or the elderly. The doubt of whether entering the space or not should arise as one reads the list of possible side effects described on the information sheet.³

There was an installation work in the Capilla de las Ánimas, a small chapel located in the right wing of the museum, where de Vega built an electrified wire fence of high voltage (7000 volts) in front of a sixteenth-century mural on the wall at the opposite end of the chapel, making it only visually accessible; the tension caused by the imminent danger of the fence invited the visitors to leave the room looking for a safer place. Displayed in the left wing was an installation consisting of thirty industrial lamps consuming 12000 watts. The light waves also produced frequencies from the range of the ultrasound. The work was barely audible and too bright to directly look at.

In *CREDO*, another installation piece installed in a room outside the main exhibition space, a number of subwoofers integrated into a concrete wall generated an amplified seventeen-hertz infrasound. The sound emitted was audible to the human ear. However, with all the bodily alterations caused by the other works, it was hard to identify if the sound came from the subwoofers or from the resonance of one's own organs. Infrasound at this frequency range can cause various physical alterations,

hallucinations, or problems with balance. On the upper floor, eight FM radio transmitters were installed in the museum offices. The devices blocked diverse radio stations within a radius of approximately two kilometres. This is another example of a work that was not perceptible to the visitors.

The exhibition came together powerfully as it ably demonstrated the attractive ambivalence of contemporary art. This means that from a curatorial perspective, the individual works, the experience, and the discourse, are in harmony with one another. However, if we isolate the experience, it comes across as uneasy and alienating. The ambivalence could also be seen in the sense that the spectrum of things offered by the exhibition is wide, but not at all evident, which is again interwoven with its own discourse of the duality of presence and absence.

Contemporary art curatorship has been influenced by notions of artistic judgement and experience, by questions of how the subject is addressed by the dematerialization of art, as well as by Relational Aesthetics and Institutional Critique (to mention a few). Today, the discipline is dominated by the return of concerns with the discursive, the social, and the educational. These three concerns address spectatorship directly, and each of them sheds light on the different positions that a spectator may take when faced with art, such as intellectualisation, rationalisation, participation, entertainment, enjoyment, engagement, and emancipation. Yet, SIN unveiled a kind of spectatorship that, to my knowledge, has not yet been considered enough by current debates. This does not mean that the exhibition was the first or

the only attempt to create a particular form of spectatorship, nor that the kinds of spectatorship mentioned above are completely strange to the project.

According to Alexander Alberro, a new understanding of spectatorship arose around 1990 and influenced contemporary curatorship.⁴ In his essay 'Periodizing Contemporary Art', Alberro argues that the reception of contemporary art has undergone a shift from cognitive conceptions to affective ones.⁵ The different forms of spectatorial engagement, such as intellectualisation and participation, could help us describe some of the most widespread debates in the theory of spectatorship, and they are interwoven with the debates surrounding contemporary art curatorship. Most of these categories encourage the empathetic relationship between art and its audience, and this seems to be the main difference with the anti-empathetic spectatorship emphasised by the exhibition. What SIN promoted was, I argue, an *alienated spectator*.

Contrary to the dominant discourses about spectatorship and the various institutional efforts to attract audiences, the works included in the exhibition do not seek to build up empathy with the audience. Rather, they provide an uneasy experience that is anti-descriptive and anti-empathetic. This raises questions about the value of empathy in the curatorial context. Why are curators, artists, and theorists more inclined to value and produce exhibitions, works, and discourses about empathetic kinds of spectatorship? One answer could be related to financial matters dressed up as a politics of inclusion or social concerns. For example, those art institutions that reach broader audiences and that have NGO-like working methods are often more

likely to get funding. Claire Bishop refers to an 'ethical turn' (inspired by Jacques Rancière and Peter Dews) in relation to participatory practices in art institutions, and she makes the distinction between artistic goals (achieved via an aesthetic experience) on the one hand, and between problem solving and concrete outcomes on the other. Bishop claims that concrete outcomes, models, and prototypes for social relations are privileged over art and aesthetics, which today seem to be denigrated as superficial and merely visual.⁶

Following Bishop, I argue that measuring art by its outcomes implies its instrumentalisation, which eventually leads to the loss of artistic value. In a 2011 interview by Ben Hunter and Nicholas Shorvon, Danish artist duo Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset suggest that 'art cannot be measured by its outcome. Its lack of direct effect is what makes it urgent in this world that is so focused on efficiency and results'.⁷ This seems to be an important lesson for contemporary art spectatorship, in both theory and practice, as the ethical seems to be taking over the artistic (or the aesthetical in Rancière's sense), and causing the artistic potential to become numbed. Bishop argues that absurdity, exhilaration, contradiction, fear, frustration or discomfort – all of them associated with the anti-empathetic – could be vital to the work's artistic impact.⁸ SIN promoting an alienated spectator can be said to participate in this challenge to current curatorial tendencies.

An alienated spectator would be free from disingenuous attempts at emancipation, as well as from the pressures of enjoying and understanding, from learning pedagogically, didactically, or democratically, and from engaging politically. Such

spectator does not take for granted a clean, safe and comfortable environment provided by the institutional framework, the comfortable atmosphere, nor confirms an expected rational immersion for the experience of art, and instead favours a physically and intellectually disorienting encounter. SIN confronted the spectator with a threatening experience precisely at a state-funded institution and a former religious centre. The experience itself is stimulating as it goes against the protectiveness one would expect from the state and the church. Security and stability are far beyond the realm of the exhibition, not to mention that the side effects may include severe physical alterations to the visitors.

In conclusion, the exhibition shed light on the question of contemporary spectatorship by reinforcing a distinction between a spectator conforming to the social and ethical values of the art institution, as well as with the understanding and interpretation of the artworks, and an alienated spectator giving up them. SIN opened up a space for a different kind of spectatorship which brought about the impulse to reclaim artistic value. This seems to be crucial in an art world that is now focused on efficiency and results, which are a threat to artistic potential. This means that far from finding the true spirit of spectatorship, a new field of study opens up, and it is our task to fully address it, as it is the task of artists, curators, critics, and scholars to always provoke new and different manners of understanding contemporary art and its relation to the public.

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¹ Carsten Seiffarth, introduction to SIN, June 2013, <http://www.mariodevega.info/sin/> (accessed 3 June 2015).

² Quoted from the letter of acceptance to be signed for entrance to the exhibition. Translated from Spanish by the author.

³ Physical reactions might be caused by the resonance of human organs when exposed to low frequencies, such as headache, nausea, and dizziness.

⁴ Alexander Alberro, 'Periodizing Contemporary Art', in Jaynie Anderson (ed.), *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence: The Proceedings of the 32nd International Congress of the History of Art* (Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 2009): 935–939.

⁵ *Ibid.*: 938.

⁶ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012): 22.

⁷ Ben Hunter and Nicholas Shorvon, 'Interview with Elmgreen & Dragset', *The White Review*, no. 3 (October 2011): <http://www.thewhitereview.org/interviews/interview-with-elmgreen-dragset/> (accessed 12 May 2015).

⁸ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*: 26.

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M Sélection: The Collection of the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art

Musée Rath, Geneva

17 May — 22 September 2013

As its title indicates, M Sélection: The Collection of the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art, held at the Musée Rath in Geneva in the summer of 2013, comprised a selection of artworks from the Zurich-based Migros Museum of Contemporary Art (Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst). Founded in 1927, Migros is a Swiss chain of neighbourhood grocery stores famous for the quality of their chocolate and generally affordable food. But there is more to Migros than delicious confectionaries. In 1957, its founder Gottlieb Duttweiler launched the 'Migros Culture Percentage', a patronage programme devoting part of the company's yearly sales to carrying out diverse social and cultural activities, and started building a collection of contemporary art. Today, the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art includes over 1,400 works, of which some forty were exhibited at the Musée Rath.

Curated by Justine Moeckli in association with museum director Heike Munder and collection curator Judith Welter, M Sélection confronts early works from the collection with recent acquisitions, prompting the viewer to consider the nature of their relation. In the exhibition catalogue, Moeckli writes that 'it is toward the recent past that many artists are turning today. The period from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1970s is a particular source of inspiration for them'.¹ This review offers a few suggestions as to why a number of artistic movements which developed starting in the mid-1960s remain endowed with significance today. In order to discuss this issue, I will focus on

how the exhibition addresses the legacies of two such movements, namely Minimalism and Conceptual Art.

Displayed in a dark alcove on the museum's main floor, Gustav Metzger's *Liquid Crystal Environment* (1965–1998) encapsulates the idea of a link between two artistic generations. The projections of crystals, whose shapes and colours shift according to the changes in temperature of the projector's heated glass slide, were first presented in London in 1966. *Liquid Crystal Environment* was recreated for the first time in Oxford in 1998, and on several other occasions prior to the present exhibition.² The work, which was developed in collaboration with Cambridge physicist Arnold Feinstein, illustrates Metzger's fascination with science and foregrounds the potential beauty of natural processes. The question of the relation between nature and culture features prominently in the opening exhibition space; yet aside from Metzger's re-created installation, this room tends to situate nature as a theme of past rather than present concerns, with works mainly dating from the 1970s.

One example is *Bodyshells* (1972), a video projection by Swiss artist Heidi Bucher (1926–1993) which displays a strange ballet of shell-like creatures emerging from the ocean. At first, the white carapaces of conic, spherical, or tubular shapes which appear on the beach could be mistaken for fantastical sculptures. As the film progresses, the enigmatic bodies begin to sway and swirl, in a slightly awkward dance routine which reveals human feet. There is never any doubt as to what hides underneath the shimmering bells-jars; yet the poetry of the beach ballet evokes

fantasies of identification with nature and its elements. On the adjacent wall, a series of Bucher's drawings of shells (*Bodyshells*, 1973), made with pencil and mother of pearl, build further on the metaphor of a meeting point between nature and culture.

The curator's decision to show Hamish Fulton's photographs of misty landscapes *Comb Fell* (1977) and Gerhard Richter's *Canary Landscapes* (1971) in the opening space suggests that the 1970s were also a time when artists perceived nature as an aesthetic object. Yet, these works also indicate that such perception implied a critical reflection on the landscape genre itself. Richter's *Canary Landscapes* are not traditional paintings but editions, slightly blurred colour heliogravures, based on a series of photographs which are displayed in his *Atlas* of photographs, collages and sketches (Sheets 138–141). The softened contours of the printed landscapes have a soft, nostalgic quality, which Richter achieves by manually retouching the print with a brush before the ink has dried. These heliogravures sit somewhere in between Richter's photo-paintings and actual photographs; as such, they contribute to further question the distinction between painting and photography in his production.



Fig.1: M Sélection, Musée Rath, 2013. Exhibition view: Sylvie Fleury, Bruce Nauman, Cosey Fanni Tutti, Alina Szapocznikow. © MAH, Genève. Photo: Annik Wetter.

Further along the main floor, the viewer comes across Sylvie Fleury's *Blue Notes & Incognito* (2004) [fig. 1]. Fleury is arguably one of the artists in the show most concerned with the heritage of Minimalism, and has repeatedly engaged with the work of American sculptor Carl Andre. *Blue Notes & Incognito* is an example of such engagement: on a flat surface made of dull grey metal plates — a counterfeit Andre — lies a smashed Chanel make-up box. The contrast between the purity of the Minimalist aesthetic and the lurid qualities of the fashion industry is a common staple of Fleury's work, and often demonstrates a desire to challenge, rather than recuperate, the earlier tradition. Perhaps the best example of this is Fleury's film *Walk on Carl Andre* (1997), in which women in high-heeled shoes walk over one of

paradigm, and claims that there is nothing 'conceptual' about his art because it can really 'fuck up your life'.⁴ Other artists highlight the necessary difference between older practices and their recuperations, and the impossibility of a mere continuation.

The recognition that such a continuation is impossible cannot but evoke a sense of nostalgia, and at times M Sélection has something of a nostalgic tone. One example of this is *Touching II* (1978), a display of black and white photographic documentation of New York alternative art and dance performances of the early 1970s, taken by French photographer Babette Mangolte. The snapshots evoke the thrills of artistic experimentation in the by-gone days when Manhattan had not yet been co-opted by developers and finance. Loosely scattered across a table, they are available to be taken up and shuffled, much like family photographs. The tactile experience this offers is, in itself, almost quaint, bringing to mind a recent past when not all institutionalised art was systematically placed out of reach, closely guarded by overzealous museum staff.

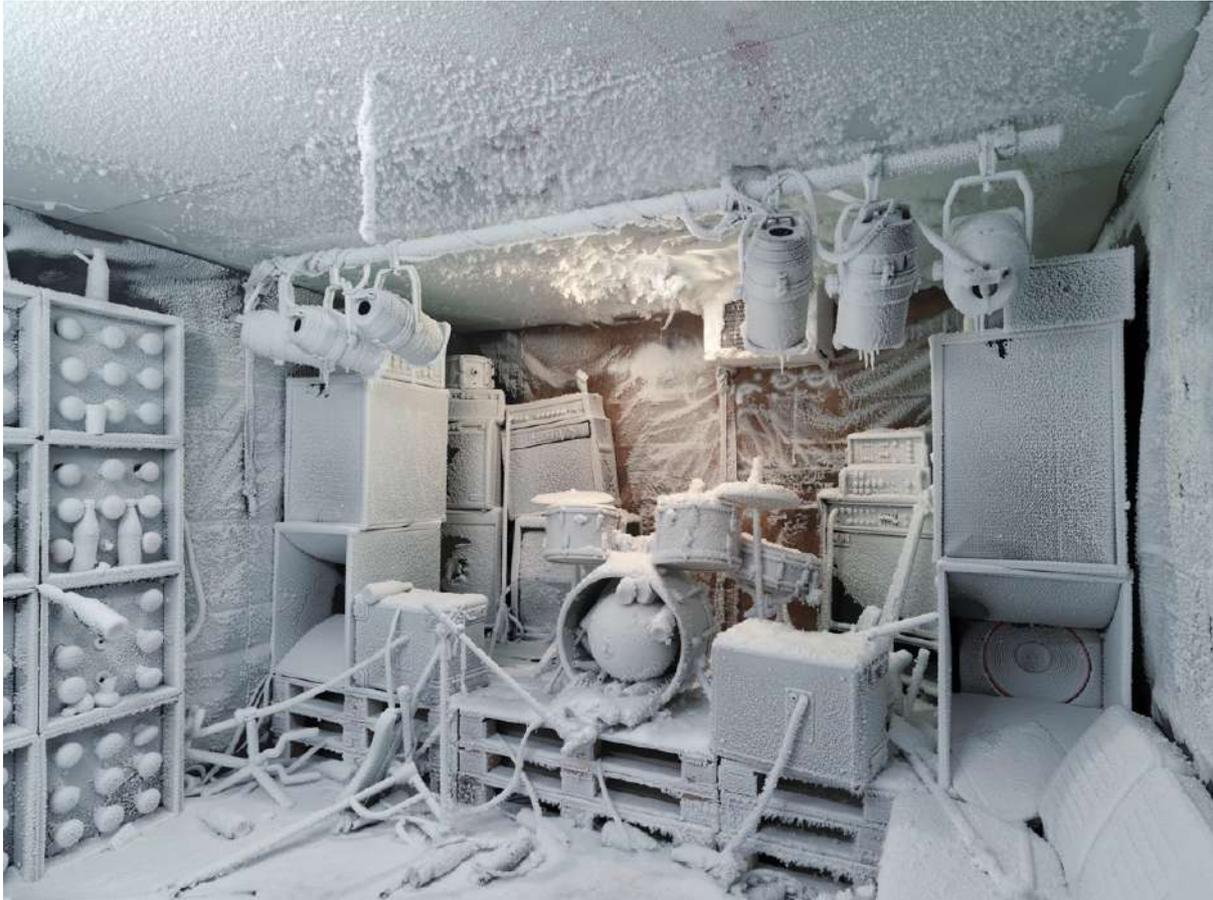


Fig. 2: Christoph Büchel, *Minus*, 2002. Deep freeze unit, concert equipment, lighting system, decor, concert trash, beer, water, 280 x 540 x 400 cm. Sammlung Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst. © the artist. Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zurich.

The most interesting aspect of the museum's lower level display, however, lies in its strong focus on contemporary artworks. *Minus* (2002) [fig. 2], by Swiss artist Christoph Büchel, is an example of a work which stages a dialogue not only with earlier traditions, but also issues specific to its own historical moment. *Minus* is an installation composed of a deep-freeze unit set at a temperature of minus twenty-four degrees Celsius, into which the viewer is invited to step. Playfulness, childish anticipation, and shock of the senses at the moment when the spectator enters the container and experiences the cold all play a role here. Inside the container, the viewer discovers a concert space covered in frost: close to the entrance, a bar is strewn with empty beer bottles; against the back wall, a stage bears instruments and

amplifiers. It is, literally, freezing — yet the scene is captivating enough to keep even this viewer inside for a couple of minutes. *Minus* is not solely an installation: it is also a performance, or rather, its trace. Before each exhibition opening, a local band performs a concert inside the deep freeze container. Afterwards, the refrigeration is activated, thus preserving the traces of the concert at the moment it ended, for all the future visitors to experience.

There is yet another way to see *Minus* as a ‘memory-installation’, to subvert Siegfried Kracauer’s famous concept of ‘memory-image’: namely, not as the mere solidification of a specific moment, but as an installation which is endowed with a specific significance, with the ‘truth’ of a historical moment.⁵ The intimate size of the container, the proximity of the stage, the informal bar area all strongly evoke the underground movement of self-administered and squat culture, which played a central role in the German and Swiss artistic scenes during the 1980s and the 1990s. Büchel, who was born in the Swiss-German city of Basel in 1966, is bound to have been influenced by this vibrant culture, which a series of repressive political measures largely succeeded in destroying sometime in the late 1990s.

To conclude, *M Sélection* clearly illustrates its curatorial intent. It demonstrates, that is, that we can make sense of much of contemporary artistic practice by looking back to Minimalism and Conceptual Art. At the same time, the show also points to the complexities of such a proposition, by underscoring the moments when relations to the past are of mixed nature: when homage turns to critique, or conversely, when critique amounts to continuation. While it makes its curatorial proposition strictly

within the context of the available collection of the Migros Museum, *M Sélection* opens up the field for a wider discussion, which would consider the historical relevance of a contemporary return to the legacies of the 1960s and 1970s more generally.

Justine Moeckli (ed.), *M Sélection. The Collection of the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art* (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2013), 144pp., 64 col. Plates, 33 halftones, £30.00.

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¹ Justine Moeckli (ed.), *M Sélection. The Collection of the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art* (Zurich: Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess, 2013): 126.

² ‘Gustav Metzger’ at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 25 October 1998 – 10 January 1999. Most recently, *Liquid Crystal Environment* was recreated for the exhibition ‘Gustav Metzger. LIFT OFF!’ at Kettle’s Yard, Cambridge (24 May 2014 – 31 August 2014).

³ See ‘M is for Minimalism: some echoes in the collection of the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art’, in *M Sélection*: 127–129.

⁴ Lawrence Weiner, interviewed in Stefan Römer, *Conceptual Paradise* (2006).

⁵ See Siegfried Kracauer, ‘Photography’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 19, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 421–436.

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