

»Vanitas«

Tanja Boukal – Body of Work 2002–2009

I have known Tanja Boukal for 10 years now and have had the chance to follow her artistic development within this decade. I was able to observe how she treats new materials which topics are of interest to her the most and in which works they find their way, which materials are used for which topic and in which manner the works are presented. Tanja Boukal does not take the easy way out – the topics she favors are politically explosive. In her choice of material she often not only meets the boundaries of what is possible and those of physical exhaustion, but also those between what is considered traditional and unconventional. Past and present, stone and photography, pixel and stitching images, white and colored – the row could be pursued almost endlessly. Tanja Boukal

loves juxtapositions, the seemingly incompatible. She puzzles over ways of expression which cause astonishment and enable new parameters of perception. Consciously or not, in her latest works Tanja Boukal concerns herself with the phenomenon of time, its diverse appearance, its perception and its fugaciousness. Even though her works do not include classic elements referring to vanitas, the impermanence of human life, luck, success, but also of hope are present again and again. »Off Shore« does not show media images of desperate fugitives, but presents their life threatening situation using little ships made from papier mâché. In the truest sense of the word they “dangle on a string” as do the lives of the fugitives who gave theirs into the hands of ruthless human

traffickers. The white paper ships are as anonymous as their human “freight”. Title and date inside of them are the subtle evidence of the fates of boat people from different origins – 28 ships stand for 28 newspaper articles published within a month. Also the lives of those people who are depicted by Tanja Boukal in her correspondent series of cross stitch images are »Hanging by a Thread« based on media images which we have seen, but noticed only for a short time and forgotten at once ourselves when paging through a newspaper. Tanja Boukal has stitched them pixel by pixel and thus tried to express their anxiety through the time this took. Another pair is formed by the two series »Rewind: Obersalzberg« and »Rewind: Pablo's Portrait«. Buildings steeped in history owned by autocratic and power-hungry

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men have been photographed by Tanja Boukal and reworked digitally more or less subtle to revive them and bring back the "good ol' times". The buildings, their walls, stones, remainders seem to project what they once got to see: On pieces of shale from the Obersalzberg Adolf Hitler appears as carefree in his private ambience as do the tourists which only receive little information about the history and meaning of the "Eagle's Nest". The current ambience of the destination seems to keep up the propaganda of its former proprietors – a seemingly innocent recreation area developed by forced laborers. The transience of wealth and power is also present in the photographs of Pablo Escobar's finca in Columbia. Tanja Boukal uses old enamel plates to "promote" the former gorgeous residence

and revives it in inconsiderable details. Also here "El Patrón" is still present, his ruinous estate in Columbia being a site of pilgrimage as well as Hitler's hideaway on the Obersalzberg. Another hulk whose political importance is not evident at first site is the former touristic complex of Ville de Lago Epecúen in Argentina. In Tanja Boukal's installation the photographs are mounted on veils and thus the complex appears like a ghost town. »Abandoned«- the title says it all: Abandoned by the people which once were abandoned by the politicians and their decision, only the knowledge of the whole story makes it possible to give the feeling of the old glamour of the complex. Time has not only turned the buildings into ruins but also made them visible again. In all of Tanja Boukal's work the color white plays a superior

role. The color white does not only suggest innocence, cleanliness or perfection but also timelessness. White cannot be classified, includes all colors. In the boxes called »White Dreams« which look like doll houses the artist stages the questioning of personal freedom which is only offered to us seemingly and in whose name a number of social constraints find their way into our individuality. Time stands still and thus lifts the images from a present time to a time vacuum. Only the self-portrait of the artist in the fifth box is colored – a sign for transience and presence. Tanja Boukal also seems to be present in her work »Where Your Feet Are Standing, Is the Center of the World«: a white cast of the artist's feet – hollow, made from papier mâché – does not only make the artist, present through her feet, to the center of

what's happening, but also her world respectively and puts the (spatial) perception of the world into perspective. Dream and reality, space and time, individual and mass – these juxtapositions also come up in the works in which Tanja Boukal uses toy babies as subjects: they symbolize innocence and airiness as well as vulnerability and tractability. As a mass they become human lemmings (»Zoom Up« /»Inner Security«), try to break free from given tracks or become cloned objects of commerce (»For Sale«). The original is no longer visible; the crocheted giant baby (»Handmade«) reproduces itself as does the artist in her auto-portraits. Original or industry? Individual item or mass? White innocence or timeless clone? Where is the presence in this utopia? While there have been perfect clones, countless baby heads

polished by hand in the older works, now, for some years, there are knitted (or stitched) images which are produced in a time-consuming manner and not only ask for the artist's talent but also her patience. »Let's Make Money« almost became a symbol in this context: planned as a single piece it was highly demanded at an art fair and thus made into a series. Nomen est omen. The velocity of the production could not keep up with the velocity of the demand of the art market. The transience of wealth, fame and social presence is evident in »Better Houses«. The installation is composed of knitted wool blankets. They suggest security, offer the feeling of warmth and see to feel at home. The positive feeling, the familiarity with this everyday object is interrupted abruptly as soon as the spectator recognizes the

subject: images of homeless people. They are people lacking every sense of feeling of warmth, a social system in which they would be in good hands. Tanja Boukal has taken photographs of these people and transferred them onto the knitted blankets. Hence the exhibition space indirectly becomes a shelter for homeless; the visitors are confronted with a social sculpture without people. The immediate transfer of the subject enables a direct confrontation; the material and the format are enough of a symbol. »Basel_back«, »Fraction«, »Ego is(t)« und »Market Value« are works in which Tanja Boukal explicitly explores her own body. She does not only use it as an physiognomic object of studies, but also puts it into the conceptual center of numerous works. On the one hand the artist wants

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to express (social) forces, concepts and expectations of people in general and herself as an artist in particular, on the other hand she points out the role of women in society: "Self-portraits shed light on the time and the society which are reflected alike in the process of production and promote aspects of the image of the artist, his role and tasks." (Elisabeth Hartung) Again and again Tanja Boukal dismembers her own body and puts it together again. The topic cumulates in the installation »Ego is(t)«; the exact cast of her body, fractured and sectional like a mannequin remains a fragment. The single body pieces are not completed to form a whole but seem to be piled upon each other randomly. Disruption through inner and outer conflicts cannot harm Tanja Boukal – the head

remains raised, supported by a hand, and looks into the dark with vivid eyes. Again the thought of vanitas is present while the artist tries to counteract. Man fights against oblivion, against transience, against time. Tanja Boukal's work adds to it by making this fight visible, questioning his mechanisms thus securing herself a place in the game of life.