

Anna Artaker

Unbekannte Avantgarde, 2008

(Unknown Avant-garde)

Photo installation

10 black-and-white photographs and 10 labels

Unknown Avant-garde consists of a selection of ten historic photographs depicting artists' groups of the twentieth century (Dada, the Surrealists, the Bauhaus, the Situationist International, etc.). In each case the photograph itself has become as much part of art history as the artists and the groups portrayed in the photographs.

The other common feature of these photographs is the presence of one woman among many male colleagues. The images thus also demonstrate the isolated position that women have been assigned by art history.

The photographs are complemented by the documentation of research on female avant-garde artists. The captions added to the photographs refer to women Dadaists, Surrealists, Situationists, etc., who are missing from the group portraits and have therefore remained invisible to art history. The captions thus correct the photographs and rewrite art history.

Anna Artaker

Individual works:

МИШЕНЬ / Zielscheibe, Moscow, 1913

(The Target Group)

Groupe dada, Paris, 1922

Surréalistes, Paris, 1924

Bauhaus, Dessau, 1926

Experimentele Groep, Amsterdam, 1949

Cobra, Paris, 1949

Abstract Expressionists, New York, 1950

Situationist International, London, 1960

Gruppe Spur, Schwabing, 1961

Austria Filmmakers Cooperative, Vienna, 1968



My work deals with the production of images in the context of historiography. Concretely, I am working with images that have been produced or used to represent history and through this have become a part of a certain historical narrative. At the core of my preoccupation with 'history' is my interest in the relationship between reality and the depiction of reality: I am interested in 'history' insofar as it is a model for the representation of reality, an object on the basis of which the complex interplay between representation and reality can be explored.>



My work does not directly consider the many different concrete manifestations of modernism but rather *historisation* of modernism. However, this differentiation between 'modernism' and its *historisation* is itself problematic, especially considering that many of the protagonists of modern art had already reflected on and created their own *historisation*. Perhaps one could also say that I am interested in what took place 'offstage' of what has now become history. My work makes an *indirect reference* to what has come to represent modernism by shifting the focus to what happened outside of it. I thus concentrate on the unsaid preconditions and exclusions, the blind spots upon which the history of modernism is based. These gaps are all the more deserving of critical attention because they often challenge or contradict the selfconception of modernism. □

48 Köpfe aus dem Merkurow Museum, 2008
 (48 Heads from the Merkurow Museum)
 Film installation

The film shows close-ups of death masks of Russian/Soviet heroes in the Merkurow Museum in Gyumri, Armenia, taken by the Armenian/Soviet sculptor Sergei Merkurow (1881–1952).

The film's title, *48 Köpfe aus dem Merkurow Museum* (48 Heads from the Merkurow Museum), describes what the viewer sees and alludes to Kurt Kren's film *48 Köpfe aus dem Szondi Test* (48 Heads from the Szondi Test, 1960). Merkurow's plaster masks replace the portraits of psychotics in Kren's film as meaningful presences. Filmed as objects, the chronologically arranged masks are at once fragments of Soviet historiography and unsettling physiognomies belonging to its (dead) heroes.

Merkurow studied under Auguste Rodin in Paris and made Lenin's acquaintance during the latter's exile from Russia. After the October Revolution he became a People's Artist of the Soviet Union and from then until his death he created many monumental sculptures of Soviet heroes. He also took death masks of over three hundred prominent Soviets, among them Lenin, Sergei Eisenstein, Leo Tolstoy, Maxim Gorky and such Communist Party functionaries as Felix Dzerzhinsky, head of the Cheka, the dreaded secret police, and Andrei Zhdanov, responsible for censorship and the repressive cultural policies of the Stalin era. The museum in the house of the sculptor's birth contains some fifty death masks made by him.

Portrait photographs used in the personality test developed by the psychiatrist Leopold Szondi (1893–1986) in 1937 provided the basic material for Kren's *48 Heads from the Szondi Test*. Each participant in the test was shown forty-eight portrait photographs and asked to choose the most sympathetic and the most unsympathetic persons. Szondi attempted to deduce the psychopathological make-up of each participant from their choice of photographs, all of which were of people suffering from libidinal disturbances. The staccato-like rhythm with which Kren presents the faces makes it impossible to view the portraits in the way intended by Szondi. Playing with the image/reproduction as a carrier of meaning, Kren subverts the attribution of specific characteristics to human physiognomies through their supposed inscription in the face.

By translating auratic death masks (each one a 'final likeness') into the (mass) medium of film, *48 Heads from the Merkurow Museum* evokes the iconography of (Soviet) propaganda, with its dissemination on a similarly huge scale and its stylisation of faces as heroic masks. At the same time, the film addresses the exploitation of auratic images by the mass media and its basis in the seemingly significant physiognomies of media-transmitted personalities. Simply to reproduce a face in this context is to exclude genuine engagement with it, since all meaningful content is allegedly inscribed in the features of the imaged person. In this way, the casts of the (more or less well-known) faces of the dead arouse a desire for specific information at the point where the viewer is confronted with 'illegible' traces invested with the task of making the invisible visible. AA

