

Peggy Buth_Material and Critique

In the work “african crocodiles are more aggressive than american alligators” Peggy Buth provokes a senseless competition by asserting that African crocodiles are more aggressive than American alligators. Regardless of whether crocodile or alligator, in any case these reptiles are forefathers of primitive times that refer to a historical point in time at which man was far from his present-day exertion of influence. The transmission of fixed notions of national strength and identity on these premises of a free animal world reveals a very particular interpretation of masked dictums of hegemony and national conflict. Lastly, Peggy Buth illustrates that this nationalism incorporates every object and becomes a figurehead for the most absurd ideas. Centrally however, stands the fact that the violent translation of this idea will always arrogate victims alongside notions of war, torture, subjugation, ostracism, and the arbitrary definition of realms. It is not by coincidence that Buth chooses a dangerous, unpredictable and alien creature such as the crocodile or the alligator to act as symbol-bearing image.

The piece “Woman From...” depicts three African women. The title of the enlarged postcard original displays the three women as exotic trophies. Like paradigms of a particular animal species, the three sole women symbolize their race and gender. “Women From...” also suggests a concern for any woman, from any far away and unknown country: without name or profession, without origin or individual history. The title of this work by Peggy Buth precisely underlines this disdain and presumptuous callousness of colonialism. As if postmarked like the stamp glued in the middle of the piece stand the women – apparently worth no more than the paper on which the postcard was printed. A lecherous postcard greeting, straight from the hell of total subjugation. Through transforming the surface of the piece with tar, Peggy Buth allows for the contours of the depictions to resemble those of a negative print.

The strong contrast gives the scene a sense of something raw and illusionary. The etchings become the character of a comprised and controlled assault and battery. Through this procedure, the facial features become depersonalized and disfigured, and the original immediacy of the photography is lost. The piece bears resemblance to a historical wood engraving, traditionally on which exemplary scenes from social life were illustrated. The only difference being that Buth chooses a snapshot, which manifests the entire brutality and obscenity of the colonial everyday life.

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Red carpet is one of Buth's often-used materials, which she uses both as for its symbolism as well as for its availability. The red carpet is a trivial symbol of the culture industry and embodies success, exposure and public recognition. The catwalk-like appearance of the stars from the film industry clearly shows that simple separation between the enthralled fans and the idolized star. Buth only speaks indirectly of the glamorous spectacle and its commercial function. One nevertheless is directly confronted with the glamour, which the artist portrays as a graphic firework on the surface of her piece "Fireworks after a really big event". The firework becomes an eruptive effusion of a failed and short-winded euphoria. Not only is the production of the entertainment industry central to the subject, but also forms of production of power. Buth's carpets are destroyed, the marks are burned in, and the ornaments are effectively less striking. One becomes aware that the grand gestures of public representation are in opposition with the tense and concentrated artistic activity, and that through a calculated form of decorative presentation the demolition and transformation of the materials is disguised.

The levels of importance culminate astonishingly in the piece "Trophy". Buth shows a piece of red carpet in the form of a mounted animal hide. A morbid fetish is exposed when animal hide and fur, antlers or even whole carcasses are not used for specific purposes but are presented in a solely decorative way. In the assumed animal hide, Buth has shaped a graphic structure that resembles the primitive drawing of unknown animals. The skin or fur of exotic and rare animals are deemed as precious materials and used for bags, shoes or coats. Wild animals that carry archaic connotations thus become objects for underlying models of luxury and culture.

The title of the work "Schwule Fotze" picks up the aggressive sayings of the everyday and shows how contradictory and cemented gender roles are. The term "Fotze", mainly utilized by males, is often used in relation to the complete devaluation of a woman. In the sexual sense it is used exclusively in reference to her vagina, which is described as dumb, disposable and contemptible. When Buth speaks of a "Schwule Fotze" ("gay cunt") she enforces all the prejudices and aggressions. To be gay still means to be socially discriminated against. Gays and lesbians are still frequently victims of insidious assaults that are often executed by heterosexual men. Their simple self-esteem is apparent through the fact that they are made insecure by the idea that an emancipated and satisfying sexuality can exist also without phallus or vagina. Their own repressed sex drive is then not so uncommonly manifested in aggressive language and violent behavior. The contradictory doubling of devaluation in the title of the work condenses this impulse coherently. Buth combines the unsophisticated and at the same time the noble in her presentation of a waxed oak wood frame with the aggressive and illegal street attitude. The etched title in the glass of the frame resembles the scratchings found on the windows of public transportation.

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Buth demonstrates here once again her ability to be socially critical through her intensive conditioning of materials and furthermore demonstrates her capacity to create objects that powerfully exercise their own sense of autonomy. Buth uses the logic of the materials to generate a logic of the argumentation. For this reason, the formal decision always stands before the contextual connotation; only the sculpture or picture promotes the subject matter and prevents dry clarification and critique from confirming any existing prejudices the viewer might have.

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Maik Schüter, born in 1972, works in Weimar as an author and curator for contemporary art. From 2003 to 2005 he was active in Hannover as a curator for the kestnergesellschaft, and during 2002 as the recipient of a DAAD grant, he was an assistant curator at the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam.

Exhibitions: Candida Höfer, Cindy Sherman, Fischli/Weiss, Hanne Darboven et al. Free exhibitions: "Trial of Power" in Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien, Berlin 2005, "Not Now!" in Kunstraum B/2, Leipzig 2003, büro spors, Berlin 2001-2003.