

De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Are history's claims to truth overstated? The group show 'Mercury in Retrograde' tried to find out. Its title refers to the titular planet's apparent backward movement through the sky, an optical illusion that occurs several times a year (including, appropriately enough, during this exhibition's run). Astrologists hold that these periods are fraught with uncertainty, menace and glitched communications. History, too, is rife with ambivalence, rehabilitating some of its characters over time and newly castigating others. Many of the works here addressed these concerns by re-examining historical episodes now largely forgotten, misunderstood or simply regarded as inconvenient.

For example, objects from the Nova Zembla collection – a display of primitive tools borrowed from the nearby Rijksmuseum – recalled the plight of a team of 16th-century Dutch explorers who, stranded in an Arctic archipelago, improvised a driftwood hut that protected them until the harsh winter passed. It is not only the facts of history that get rewritten but also the values ascribed to its narratives: over centuries the explorers' ordeal has alternately been recast as a tale of intrepid ambition (under colonialism), perseverance in the face of hardship (during the Cold War) or the dangers of the uncharted (in the post-Soviet era).

The exhibition brought this episode into the present by complementing the artefacts with Sven Johné's photographs

of the pioneers who tried to realize their dreams on the small, uninhabited German island of Vinta (*Vinta*, 2004). Werner von Braun launched some of his early (and less successful) rockets on the island, and the resulting engineering infrastructure convinced Fritz Lang to film parts of his epic *Frau im Mond* (*Woman in the Moon*, 1929) there. This wildly expensive silent film about mining the moon for gold eerily presaged our space-age future: the countdown before a rocket's launch was a dramatic device invented for the film, one that has since been appropriated by space programmes everywhere.

Several pieces in the show re-imagined history by inventing events or characters, arbitrarily fusing the documentary and the speculative. David Maljkovic's *Scene for a New Heritage I and II* (2004/2006) is a two-part video in which pilgrims from the years 2045 and 2063 revisit a Croatian monument to World War II; the ostensible function of the monument's glimmering Gehry-esque shape is as indeterminate to visitors from the future as it is now, though the pilgrims still manage to invoke a future in which the ideas of collective memory, group mourning and official history have faded into oblivion – a revitalizing *tabula rasa* that art can help engender.

Others looked at history through the eyes of re-enactors. In his video *Godville* (2004) Omer Fast interviews the staff of Virginia's colonial Williamsburg, a tourist attraction that re-creates the era of the American Revolution. By mixing together snippets in which the interviewees act out



Michael Blum
*Lippmann,
Rosenthal & Co.*
2006
Mixed media
Installation view

their Revolutionary roles and then speak as their real selves. Fast forges a bizarre narrative that combines traditional 18th-century ideals with ruminations on ethics in the post-11 September world, implicitly recalling a simpler age when rules and roles were more strictly codified. Likewise, a specially commissioned booklet by Tilman Meyer-Faye on the commercialization of Rembrandt's 400th birthday laments how graphic designers now insidiously cut and paste from his masterpieces, while a Rembrandt re-enactor of sorts explains how the individual dabs that compose a painting are meaningless until they've been perceived as a whole. The same can be said of histories: their makers, from historians to paleontologists, create narratives by filling in the blanks based on information they glean from fossils and skeletons, or documents and artefacts. Questions of real/fake or accurate/inaccurate are the wrong ones: histories and their legacies can be simultaneously constructed and genuine.

De Appel's own history was examined too. In *Lippmann, Rosenthal & Co.* (2006) Michael Blum reconstructs part of the building as the former Jewish-owned bank it was until the Nazis took it over in the 1940s. Fittingly enough, De Appel has just published a massive tome reviewing two decades of its own history, thereby (inadvertently) creating an official version of events. Yet this exhibition suggested an opposite tack: while many shows now have websites, that of 'Mercury in Retrograde' was a Wikipedia-style affair that anyone could edit. It also offered a peek into the murky business of composing a group show, by explaining how the curators first encountered the exhibition's artists (for example, at the Istanbul Biennial, an e-flux video store, studio visit or dinner party), and as such promoted an open-source approach to historiography that seeks more to demystify than to debunk.

Douglas Heingartner

Sven Johné
Vinta
(detail)
2004
Black and white
photographs



Mercury in Retrograde