

Still life

Six glass cases hang down from the ceiling, apparently weightless. Transparent from all sides, they allow a view into tiny illuminated worlds. The show-cases evoke associations of terraria, these strange little planets in which Man like a second God of Creation brings forth his own world with teeming fauna. Kotter's glass cases are however not populated by living beings, nor are they furnished with an unreal and wild nature. Instead, they are show cases for objects. Each of these rectangular slabs is of rigorous composition and segmented into three strata. The linear conception within repeats the given proportions of the glass case. An object of resin constitutes the compositional centre of gravity based at times on a rectangle, a square, a circle or a cross. This is the point of reference for the viewer, taking the place of the animal in the terrarium. Another object, mostly a finding from everyday life, situates itself opposite to the geometric figure. Both interact on the levels of form as well as content. The rigorous formal conception of the glass cases is however broken up through the irony of the message.

This work refers to an ancient visual motif that has acquired a many-layered significance since the Renaissance. Kotter's three dimensional still lifes call for a reflection on this theme's plural meaning in the context of art history. A still life is in itself a sign referring to a mundane world. Thus many authors from classical antiquity report about great masters who were capable of deceiving the viewers with their pictures. The paintings in Pompeij for instance confirm these legends and are reflections of a society steeped in the pleasure of life. In the Middle Ages, withdrawn as they were from the world with their mysticism and Christianity, the still life was unknown. Only the quest for knowledge in the Renaissance, the efforts of the painters towards a fidelity with respect to nature, and a continuation of medieval symbolism brought once again the old motif to light. The still life unfolded its meaning on a multiplicity of levels. Within the context of Christian iconography the still life could remind the viewer of the transience of all life with the help of skulls, withered flowers or extinguished candles. Vase arrangements with lily, iris or columbine evoked the purity of the virgin Mary. Still life with flowers acquired a profane significance, alluding to the seasons and the cyclical principle of nature they manifest. It was also conceivable as an allegory of the five senses. In the same manner as the still life with flowers the book, table and hunting arrangements also acquired their decisive character in the dutch art of the 16th and 17th centuries. The still life also included a motif with which the artist could demonstrate his craftsmanship, not lastly because he referred to the painters of antiquity with his motif. Thus still life served the artists of the 20th century towards a demonstration of formal experiments and the presentation of a new art.

Hans Kotter plays with the knowledge concerning the tradition of the motif. He takes up traditional themes and satirizes them. An old alarm clock cast into resin stands opposite to two steel cubes. As a symbol of vanitas the clock standing still collides in its direct symbolism with the transcendent meaning of the constructivist or minimalist empty spaces framed in steel. Another 'three dimensional image' takes up the mariological theme: the Holy Virgin stands as a thin figure of clay opposite to the transparent and cross-like vessel containing a rosary. In another glass case this composition is taken up in a satirized mode. The toy hare there becomes a synonym for a hunted animal which can be killed with a children's pistol. The still life with books can be taken as an exhortation to contemplate. The thin rectangular slab with the newspapers cast in stands opposite to the three obviously empty books. Through the strange property of resin of letting paper becoming transparent the letters appear to float in the space of the cube. Is it the writing which will fill the books? Is the writing a symbol for the flow of thought? More earth-bound but not less poetical are the two last glass cases. One of them, with knives and forks, is dedicated to the culinary pleasure with a photographic reproduction depicting the main nutriment. Cast into the cube are opalescent toy animals. The second one reminds of the tradition of still life with flowers.

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