

Opening address by Prof. Dr. Anna Zika, Bielefeld

KRAUS-Zeitstreifen (Time Stripes)

Nothing is as outdated as yesterday's paper.

The magazine pictures Max Otto Kraus uses for his work series KRAUS – Zeitstreifen, i.e., "Time Stripes", are all at least two years old.

So, what's the point? An artistic reflex of current events cannot be meant. Instead, this exhibition project opens a variety of historical perspectives, and hence prospects, which we will look at one by one.

A first tentative approach to the images in terms of formal description reveals ornamental color strips mounted on uniform frames. On a closer look the strips turn out to be composed of a multitude of image fragments, evidently cut out from magazines and glued in line on the reverse side of stationery printed with a business letterhead including, in large red type, the signature "KRAUS".

The artistic technique of the papier collé, or collage, originated in the combinatory methods of early cubism around 1910. Georges Bracque and Pablo Picasso used scraps of wallpaper or textiles to „disassociate color from shape and to present both elements separately“. In this view, the Time Stripes by Max Otto Kraus appear as technical etudes in composition, or plainly as wall decoration.

Art history, however, has another reference point in store that is certainly more in accordance with the artist's intentions: around 1920 some artists got together – initially in Zurich, not far from Constance where Max Otto Kraus lives, later in Berlin – to deal with the horrors of the battles of material experienced in WW I. In the so-called dadaism they chose the absurd and grotesque as an esthetic counterpiece to the unspeakable terror they had witnessed. Collage und montage seemed the most apt artistic strategies of coping with existence in a shattered and disoriented world.

Just like the works of the Dadaists, the work group Zeitstreifen was preceded and, so to speak, triggered by a martial event: the Time Stripes had originally been conceived as a „visual war diary“ of the recent conflict in Iraq, which the American president George Bush Jr. had proclaimed like a crusade against pagan barbarians. And as with the Dadaists, work on this project escalated to a more general criticism of conditions in the present world, which – according to Kraus – is still dominated by imperialism, colonialism, and racism.

At the same time, the techniques of collage and montage in their historic context reflected the „industrialisation of seeing“ in the early age of mass media. Then as now the creative recycling unmasks the abuse of photography by the journalism industry; for the latter is obviously less concerned with providing information via pictures than with producing sensational stimuli. By confrontation with a grotesque

distorting mirror, Hausmann, Schwitters, or Grosz had forced their contemporary public to reconsider their mechanisms of perception; in the meantime, however, the conditions of apperception and appropriation of the world have shifted somewhat. Reality is experienced as a conglomeration of discrete impressions compiled from throughout the globe. In addition, the consumption of, resp. the exposure to video clips has habituated the younger generation to ever shorter time units per image signal. The resulting image flood is lamented everywhere as “information overload”; but actually no information is generated in the first place. At least not as long as the term „information“ is meant to comprise the chance to react adequately to what is perceived, and to adopt a proper attitude towards it.

Thus the journalistic conventions of most so-called news magazines reduce the term information ad absurdum. Flooded and overwhelmed by visual impressions, our brain’s image storage becomes unable to build and structure a visual memory, its natural imaginary museum; at best, the sensory stimuli can be called up or scanned on the associative level of a memory game.

Moreover, digital manipulative techniques have long since put the reality content of images into question; without much practical effect, however, since we are still inclined to believe what we see – and if it’s in the paper, it’s got to be right.

Kraus himself states that the esthetic decisions met by him (i.e., in the alignment of image fragments) lead to subjective, often random image sequences that have not a jot to do with the (quote) „original information“. Thus he relegates the originals from which he chose and cut out his working materials into the realm of meaninglessness.

Moreover an intrinsic danger of image consumption becomes apparent – for how, beg your pardon, is the picture of a torture victim, e.g. of an Iraqi prisoner at Abu Ghraib, distinguishable from the picture of someone who just play acts a torture victim – such as in Pasolini’s “Salò, or The 120 Days of Sodom”.

From such ambiguities it is not a long way to mere formal analogy, e.g. if the nude body of a concentration camp prisoner is mounted as a visual reprise of a female stripper.

Such and similar associative patterns constitute a mnemotechnique that is (among others) fundamental for the performance of our memory. However, if the collective memory of nations remembers false or misleading images, history will turn into hype and humbug.

Last not least, the Time Stripes raise the issue of thinking in historic dimensions, and of history itself inasmuch as it is understood as a documentation and tracking of time.

History as a commemorative endeavor, in oral as well as in mentality history, links political events with private fate. In the case of Kraus, familial past is worked up by dealing artistically with personal finds: the Time Stripes are mounted on the reverse sides of sheets of stationery that belonged to Mr Kraus senior, remembered in the family above all by the stories from the Second World War he used to reiterate until his death. The son he left behind, present here tonight [at the show’s opening] both in person and in his work, develops, in monotonously and contemplatively assembling scraps of alien realities, a sort of glue mantra, a litany of coping with the past that comes across as individual as well as hyperpersonal. In this respect, his work procedure resembles a devoted archivist’s job.

By patiently and meticulously turning this prayer wheel, the smallest units of history, the instants, are

literally preserved and become tangible and comprehensible as glances into the paper.

History appears as something layered, the image stripes make an effect like cross-sections through the sedimentations, the strata of time.

In perceiving the juxtaposition and sequence of image scraps, our brain reconstructs and makes us experience the assumed directedness of the time arrow; whereat the time arrow is nothing but an attempt to make the succession of experiences conceivable in spatial dimensions. For time as we perceive it is not a gift of nature; the notion, time would run continuously and in measurable perspectivic segments is an accomplishment of cultural conventions and of philosophy.

The historical accomplishment of not only inventing a phenomenon as abstract as time but also to depict it by means of scales and other pictured symbols, is what we can empathize in the Time Stripes by Max Otto Kraus. The trained photographer, i.e. in the literal meaning of the Greek word: someone who writes with light, proves here to be also a chronographer: a writer of time.

Anna Zika, Konstanz, June 18, 2005