

Art Review:

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'Sometimes I'm surprised at how good I can paint and at other times I'm surprised at my ineptness' Alex Katz

MARCH
2009

Matthew Collings
Finds out what
makes icons
so, um... iconic

Evan Holloway
Intelligent
punk art
from LA

Emma Rendel
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a brand new
comic strip

Scotland
Is this where
we'll find
the next YBAs?

*'I like the thing of
dominating
people's minds'*

ALEX KATZ ON GREATNESS

FUTURE GREATS

PRETENDERS TO THE THRONE:
30 ARTISTS FOR TOMORROW
SELECTED BY

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HANS ULRICH OBRIST / ARTREVIEW'S CRITICS



KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin

30 November – 25 January

Political/Minimal

'To talk of political minimalism is a contradiction in terms.' So writes Jenny Schlenzka in one of the catalogue essays accompanying *Political Minimal*, curated by the internationally renowned Klaus Biesenbach. Biesenbach has selected 32 works by a multinational, transgenerational set of artists who together, the show attempts to argue, first refer back to, then attempt to overhaul, the rather staid, self-referential and ultimately politically irresponsible nature of 1960s minimalism in favour of what it could have been, had artists at the time had the courage of their twenty-first-century counterparts. *Political/Minimal*, then, is framed by something of a wilful misconception, the all-too-confident assertion of a simple dichotomy between the political and the highly formal, while the artists and their work it presents risk becoming mere instruments in a rather forlorn quasi-art-historical game. So far so 'curatorial', and to be fair, Biesenbach is quick to point out that minimalism, or at least its design equivalent, has so profoundly worked its way into contemporary material culture via such objects of consumer desire as the iPod, the Nintendo GameCube and almost every inoffensively Nordic-sounding item to come out of IKEA as to blur the boundaries, making what was once seen as elitist art practice available to the masses in a multiplicity of ever-more domesticated (and perhaps domesticating) forms; see, for example, Rosemarie Trockel's large-scale riff on a kitchen stovetop, *Ohne Titel* (1992). What we're dealing with, we're supposed to understand, is a minimalist return to the real. It's difficult to see, however, what Biesenbach's equation of minimalism with much of today's fetishisation of the visually bland has to do with a number of works on show here, which, though by no means entirely without interest, seem to withdraw further and further from view when placed in a room together, as if somehow cowed by their proximity to such a master narrative. Equally, it's peculiar that Biesenbach feels the need to remind both himself and the audience that the collection of oil tanks used in illegally transporting oil from Turkey to Iraq (xurban_collective's installation *The Containment Contained*, 2003–7) 'cannot present itself in the gallery as the exclusively autonomous object of an art exhibition, but implies... a history, a social and political perspective'.

The same can't really be said of Damien Hirst's *Har Megiddo* (2008), which lurks, all big and circular and covered in the bodies of countless dead flies, as if presiding over the whole decidedly self-conscious nonspectacle. On learning that this work was in the show, my first thought was, 'Why?' That was before I realised that the whole political/minimal thing was in reality as slight a shtick as you could hope to find. (Hirst is, or may as well be, interchangeable with Bono, such is their pursuit of publicity, their love of vainglorious political gestures and the fact that someone, somewhere is still weirdly in thrall to this pair of hobgoblins.) Emphasising the problems inherent in trying to determine what can or cannot be considered minimalist, the show deals in a kind of catch-all approach. Mona Hatoum's barbed-wire *Cube* (2008) sits alongside the excellent Taryn Simon's equally excellent, albeit strikingly out of place, photo portrait of Bill Gates, *Black Square I* (2008). Nearby, spotlighted from above, rests Teresa Margolles's *Begräbnis/Burial/Entierro* (1999), which for all the fanfare Biesenbach's catalogue gives it, is still just a premature fetus entombed in concrete. Rather than being a powerful and disconcerting meditation on the elemental processes and the gap in the exchange value of First and Third World bodies, Margolles's posthobgoblinian work manages to come across as twee/exploitative. Intentionally or not, both Derek Jarman's deeply personal *Blue* (1993) and Terence Koh's mansize inverted pink triangle (*Untitled*, 2008), while by no means incongruous additions, suggest that perhaps all that 1960s self-referentiality might actually have been gesturing towards something at the same time both intensely subjective and formally objective, historical and contemporary.

Perhaps the most direct challenges to minimalism's bygone masculinist aesthetic come from Monica Bonvicini's *White* (2003), the cracked glass surfaces of which really do appear to bear witness to an act of violence, Kitty Kraus's slight but effective *Ohne Titel* (2007) and Sarah Ortmeyer's mischievous deconstruction of the national flags of Berlin's former occupying powers, *Die Alliierten (II)*, *Sowjetunion*, *Grossbritannien*, *Frankreich*, *USA* (2007). Perhaps the best metaphor for *Political/Minimal*'s critical ambitions, and the show as whole, is to be found in Gregor Schneider's photographic mockups of his proposed project *Cube Venice* (2005), the black cube in question referring directly to Mecca's Kaaba and intended to sit slap-bang in the centre of St Mark's Square. Mildly diverting in theory, unrealisable in practice. *Luke Heighton*



Political/Minimal, 2008
(installation view, KW Institute
for Contemporary Art, Berlin).
Photo: Uwe Walter

