

ANNETTE KELM*Die Bücher*

8.5. – 31.7. 2021

Photography plays a vital role as both a representative and conservator of the past. It can document realities as easily as stage them, and yet it always serves the function of depicting. The result is a close relationship to the subject portrayed, in a direct overlap of form and content. The theory of indexicality, according to which photographic images derive ontologically from the technical process by which they are produced, has to some extent seen its argumentation weakened by the advent of digital imagery. The indexical character refers to capturing a moment in time in a material object, one that authentically combines historical information and unique narrative. While this reality-effect should be met with a healthy dose of skepticism today, photography nonetheless still manifests in the now an intensely present image of the past, which is the result of its representative function. The crucial question then is how this relates to a conception of the real. What status does the image have as a trace of a past that can be rescued into the present primarily in visual form?

Annette Kelm's artistic practice, with its focus on seriality and a seemingly objective approach to multiply coded materialities, is often described as conceptual—it reflects on the medium of photography and appropriates its classical genres in order to fulfill their conventions in a deliberately incomplete way by means of an abstracted, contemporary adaptation. Photographic forms of representation are explored in terms of the semantic charge they lend to the subject, though the representation is simultaneously infiltrated by subtle ambivalences of meaning. The photographic image presents itself as a both reduced and formalized composition that allows a concurrence of seeing and reading in the interest of assigning meaning. The subject thus appears familiar and distanced at the same time. Kelm's series *Die Bücher* [The Books] differs from her previous work, however, in that it considers the question of the object and its image to a disproportionately greater degree. This is due above all to the fact that the photographed books are artifacts whose graphic design vividly reflects cultural history, but which are integrated into a much larger historiography.

On 10 May 1933, National Socialist students burned some 30,000 books on the Opernplatz in Berlin. On the initiative of the German Student Union, numerous book burnings followed in other German cities. "Lists of harmful and undesirable literature" were also drawn up, on the basis of which "un-German" ideas were removed from libraries and bookstores. These lists included many well-known authors, but also those who have since disappeared from cultural memory. The banned books covered political literature, scientific books, novels, and poems, so-called trivial literature—even children's books were burned. They were denounced because they reflected a progressive zeitgeist, because they spread "leftist" ideas, because they stood for the emancipation of women, alternative role expectations, gender relations, homosexuality or internationalism—or because they were written by Jewish authors. The burning of these books and their subsequent erasure marked the *Gleichschaltung*, or bringing into line, of both public opinion and the universities; it went hand in hand with the fierce persecution of Jewish writers and intellectuals. Dissenters were persecuted as well.

Annette Kelm's photographs show the contemporary edition of publications that fell victim to the public spectacle of the book burnings or were blacklisted. In these pictures, the book becomes a planar object, the cover becomes central. Evenly illuminated and positioned frontally on a white surface, a soft shadow alone lends it plasticity. These are images familiar from epro-photography—dispassionate reproductions of objects in which the camera seems to refrain from any interpretive perspective. This emphasis on the factual avoids symbolic freighting, allowing the cultural and ideological significance of the publications to come to the fore instead. The orientation towards formal criteria and the renunciation of any narrative elements also emphasizes the translation of the object into the two-dimensional space of photography—the book becomes an image. Yet medium and materiality enter into a complex alliance here. After all, the book, like photography, is a medium of reproduction. It manifests itself materially, but can in principle be exchanged for another copy. The books Annette Kelm depicts, however, are more than just representatives of their respective contents. The copies she photographs are in fact from that time. This makes them affectively charged vehicles of communication, survivors of the auto-da-fé of 1933, and representatives of their authors—many of whom went into exile, were persecuted or murdered. Their photographic representation, however, also

makes them relics of a past that resist immediate accessibility. We cannot leaf through these books, we cannot read them, we can only look at them as images. As immediate as their photographic presence makes them seem, it renders them as abstractions that beg the very fundamental question of how and under what conditions historical consciousness can continue to function when fewer and fewer contemporary witnesses remain to report on the past.

The conflict between the tangible surface and the immaterial, which manifests itself in an object on a psychological and affective level, characterizes those material items from the past that are studied, collected, and exhibited to provide visual evidence of this past. Through Annette Kelm's displacement of the object into the image of the object, this contradiction is exposed precisely because photography suspends the tangible aspect of the book.

The occasional traces of use and small tears in the dust jacket lend Kelm's books a tactile quality, and yet they remain on a level of pure visuality. Given that the filmic and photographic documentation of the Nazi period is predominantly in black-and-white, the colorful covers are by contrast strikingly eye-catching and endow the photographs with vitalism—that is, the suggestion of an independent life of their own. Isabelle Graw has recently reclaimed the concept of vitalism for painting. A vitalist work suggests that it “lives” or speaks to us, that it has been directly enriched with the reality of its producer's life via the process of its creation and the physical act of painting preserved in it. Despite the apparatus standing between Kelm and her work, the photographically represented books seem enlivened and “animate,” liberated from space and time. This serves to bridge the historical distance and allows her subjects to emerge from history. And yet, as a result of their restriction to a surface in which information and evocation repeatedly overlap, they manage to thwart expectations of an auratically charged material relic that speaks to us in the here and now.

Annette Kelm's interest lies in the liberal, enlightened, and metropolitan zeitgeist from which the books emerged, and therefore also in their cover designs, which reflect the differentiated aesthetics of the avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s. Artistically designed dust jackets first appeared towards the end of the 19th century, achieving great importance in the course of the Book Art Movement. Those of the 1920s and 1930s incorporated the formal language of Expressionism, Constructivism, Bauhaus, and Dada, employed photomontages, and experimented with innovative typography. John Heartfield, perhaps the most prominent cover designer of the time, designed many of the blacklisted books from the publishing house Malik that Kelm has photographed. But there are also many other artists who designed books as objects: Käthe Kollwitz (*Dr. M. Créde, Volk in Not!* [People in Need!]), Martha Wagner-Schidrowitz (*Eva Leidmann, Auch meine Mutter freute sich nicht! Fehlritte eines bayrischen Mädchens* [My Mother Was Not Pleased Either—The Missteps of a Bavarian Girl]), Ilna Ewers-Wunderwald (Hanns Heinz Ewers, *Alraune*), Georg Salter (Henri Guilbeaux, *Wladimir Iljitsch Lenin. Ein treues Bild seines Wesens* [Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. A Faithful Depiction of His Nature]), Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*), or Franz Masereel (Eca de Queiroz, *Das Verbrechen des Paters Amaro* (*The Crime of Father Amaro*)). However, avant-garde covers that reflect contemporary aesthetics are only one aspect. Other book covers are characterized by a naturalistic look, and at times it can be surmised that the use of a more conventional visual language was intended to appeal to a broader audience. For example, John Heartfield's cover for *Wege der Liebe* [Ways of Love], a collection of short stories by Alexandra Kollontai, stands in clear contrast to other publications from the “leftist” spectrum, whose covers deliberately hew to the style of the Russian avant-garde. That beyond the respective content of the books, the National Socialist regime unquestionably also sought to erase their design as an aesthetic of modernity, and not only in these examples.

As a series of photographic “portraits,” each book can stand alone, yet they profit from comparison with others in regard to the diversity of their design, the expressive typography, or simply an interesting-sounding title. At the same time the diversity on display here also reflects the broad range of books denounced as “un-German.” Canonical works and literary classics find themselves next to novels that would probably be considered light fiction today, political tracts next to books on sexual education and the emancipation of women. Kelm presents these books without a system and non-hierarchically. Though the question of why these particular books were blacklisted remains unanswered, it directs our focus to the respective titles. Independently, they are distinguished precisely by the fact that they are not representative of a past era, but rather are individuals in book form.

There is no archive of blacklisted books that Kelm could simply photograph; instead she worked together with a number of private and public collections. Nor does the series strive for completeness. Rather, *Die Bücher* [The Books] can be viewed as an excerpt from a potentially incompletable concept, one that also reveals the sheer scale of the “purge” carried out by the National Socialists and their supporters. Annette Kelm’s *Die Bücher* [The Books], therefore does not distinguish between ordinary-looking books and those that are expressive, even evocative. They are all presented for contemplation on equal footing, and thereby wrested from the past. The historical relic rescues itself into the present in visual form, while refusing to make the ultimately incomprehensible tangible or to become part of a historical consciousness that, by referencing historical images, yet again highlights the perpetrators’ self-aggrandizement and the burning piles of books. Kelm provides an alternative to these familiar, backward-looking documentary images, focusing instead on the authors and victims of National Socialist politics by giving them back a visibility that, to some extent, remains lost to this day. Reading their books brings them alive.

By Vanessa Joan Müller