

## MEYER\*KAINER

**Verena Dengler**

**„Führt ja wieder die 40 Stunden Woche ein! 35 Stunden Schlaf sind einfach zu wenig“**

*Inasmuch as art preserves, with the promise of happiness, the memory of the goal that failed, it can enter, as a 'regulative idea,' the desperate struggle for changing the world. Against all fetishism of the productive forces, against the continued enslavement of individuals by the objective conditions (which remain those of domination), art represents the ultimate goal of all revolutions: the freedom and happiness of the individual.*

-Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1979, Beacon Press)

*Fitness centers, hospitals, educational institutions, wealth management companies: in each case, their customers want to achieve and sustain their aspirations. Such industries proliferate in response to the consumer plea: "Change me!"*

James H. Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine II, *Authenticity, What Consumers Really Want* (Harvard Business School Press, 2007)

*Authenticity is generated not from the bounded classification of an Other, but from the probing comparison between self and Other...Invocations of authenticity are admissions of vulnerability, filtering the self's longings into the shaping of the subject.*

-Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: the formation of folklore studies* (U. Wisconsin Press, 1997)

In an art world where the phrase “design solution,” seems to have become a byword for a certain contemporary cool—signifying an artist who’s approach is purposeful yet relaxed, personal yet relevant, and purified of outdated pretensions—the practice of artist Verena Dengler (b. 1981, lives and works in Vienna) at once fulfills the given criteria of the term and irritates its implications by refusing to adopt its core postulation of authenticity.

In the reception of previous exhibitions of her work, Dengler’s joyous confounding of the value of mass-market interpretations of the products of aesthetic elites (as in the dumbing-down and lightening-up of Wiener Werkstatt textile designs for the working-class) and, on the other hand, of mass-market, pop, or “small” productions that excel in speaking originally in the language of *hoch Kultur* (such as the seminal *Humanic* ads for Austrian television in the 1970s), have rightfully been lauded as artistic revolts against the mechanisms by which such an elite traditionally distinguishes itself in society. Where one might have expected—and even accepted—an attitude of cynicism, or irony, or superiority, or innocence about this, Dengler’s practice has been defined by a consistent and definite sense of celebration, which seems at odds with the struggle that animates it and hence comes as a remarkable, energizing surprise; one feels that the artist has above all recognized glory in breaking down these hollow conventions that have been

used to instill and reify social hierarchies that were of benefit to the few at the expense of the many, and come what may in the wake of their destruction.

It would seem that the ambition of the artist's current exhibition at Galerie Meyer Kainer, her second solo show with the gallery, is to expand her discourse on such pressures and contradictions to encompass the circumstances of the present—a clarifying refinement and a messy expansion at one and the same time. At issue in *Führt ja wieder die 40 Stunden-Woche ein! 35 Stunden Schlaf sind einfach zu wenig* is the possible role, and attendant responsibility, of a member of society that is still labeled an artist and expected to perform the artist's traditional function, but in a world in which the societal conventions that have invested the term with its meaning since the modern era have been dissolved and reconfigured in problematic ways.

The central sculptural arrangement in *Führt ja wieder*, titled *Germany vs. Austria/German- Austrian Lovers* (2010), was originally created for the exhibition *Town-Gown Conflict*, curated by the artist Lucy McKenzie for the Kunsthalle Zürich (2011). That exhibition was addressed, in McKenzie's words, to the "social differences, educational shortfalls, mechanisms of social differentiation, segregation and the demonstration of the superiority of the educated classes over the 'productive' members of society." Dengler's assemblage of personal artifacts, objects picked up at the flea market, discounted stucco, embroideries, and other such various traces of the artist and "the artist" can be called a sculptural inquiry into the way in which the artist-as-such, while still expected on the one hand to act as though he or she occupies a special zone that is withheld at a critical distance from society, has also, as the purest expression of an individual bearing the powers and responsibilities of criticality and creativity, become the ideal—or perhaps *idée fixe*—of the new class of post-institutional knowledge workers who are mobile, flexible, empowered, and already busy bringing society forward into its next epoch. The problem Dengler recognizes as inherent to the artist under such conditions is in a sense not different from that faced by the special class of Rock Star in the late sixties: the contradiction between maintaining one's status as an authentically antisocial rebel (or critical elite) and "selling out"—which really means accepting one's role as a cultural ideal that actively gives shape to society by reifying the structure serving its dominant ideology. Thus the paintings and drawings Dengler exhibits in *Führt ja wieder*—"Interrail," (2003-12) "The" (2011/12), etc—are more of a question about purity and authenticity than an instance of it. Or perhaps one should rather say they are a joke, or a moment where the artist laughs at her own earnest failure: true to her celebratory nature, rather than adopting the posture of a solution to the contradictions of being an artist (that is, a solution to remaining authentic), Dengler does the only other honest thing that would seem possible: she takes the exhibition as an opportunity to exacerbate the problem, to lead the contradictions that it would be in the interest of the few to dissemble from the many to their logical conclusion: total tension and absolute undeniability, and come what may in the wake of their destruction.

Lionel Train  
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