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The Semantics of Crisis:
Birgit Brenner's analytical installations of everyday life

In her room-sized works, Birgit Brenner combines wooden slats, Styrofoam, and cheap cardboard signs with laconic texts. A former student of Rebecca Horn, Brenner transforms private dramas into images of social situations that are laconic and precise. Recently, the Deutsche Bank Collection purchased a group of drawings by the Berlin-based artist. Brigitte Werneburg on Birgit Brenner's excursions into capitalist reality.

When it's a matter of writing about Birgit Brenner and her art, it's essential to begin with a typical Brenner sentence. There's just no getting around it. The acuity and even cruelty in the way a Brenner sentence pierces our mental montages of everyday life is a key feature of her work. A typical Brenner sentence, for instance, sounds like this: "They pray every day. To remain healthy and make sure the car starts." And it's true: we're constantly demoting the value of our most prized possession, health, to the level of an ordinary consumerist product. In everyday life, the body is seen as a mere car, and both should please, please go on working.

Typical Brenner sentences can be found in the 44-year-old artist's large-scale installations-amateurishly shot photographs enlarged into mediocre digital prints that Brenner favors affixing to cardboard signs and then nailing to roofing boards or, as was more recently the case, jamming into the Styrofoam of her fragmented body sculptures. The sentences also appear in the paragraphs of text barely legible in the backgrounds of her oil sketches and drawings. "Not now" is one of these typical sentences. We read it-and immediately we're inwardly apologizing for bothering someone. We can't help it. In short, the typical Brenner sentence operates like a Readymade. It's a Brillo box of language.

Like many other contemporary artists, Birgit Brenner operates in the lower lying territories of everyday life; her work is located in the pop-cultural context of contemporary art. It was initially through Pop culture that the aesthetic of everyday banality entered art production entirely unfiltered and free from any extraneous intent. This conjoining of art and life was fascinating chiefly due to the fact that it didn't carry the whiff of the documentary and its concomitant cultural and socio-political ambitions. And it was the Readymade, in which everyday life seemed to acquire form on its own terms and to speak in all its disdainful ordinariness, with which Pop art resisted such ambitions.

In the typical Brenner sentence, this manner of speech becomes incontrovertibly true. To achieve this, it doesn't need to be taken verbatim from everyday conversation. It can be inspired by a discussion at a neighboring table in a café or cite an idea expressed in one of the many Internet chats and forums that Birgit Brenner researches two to three hours each day. It's a given that the everyday life she compresses into the artistic miniature of the psychodrama is every bit invented as it is found. The definition of the Readymade has changed since the 1960s, of course-together with the way it is addressed, for instance in the way Jason Rhoades' mega-installations run rampant, presenting the Readymade in a spectacular material overload. Which suggests that the deceased artist was less indebted to the spirit of the pop-cultural everyday than to the spirit of pop economy, which has now driven not only Wall Street, but the whole global financial system to ruin.

Some time ago, however, a typical Brenner sentence formulated before the collapse of international investment banking addressed this very ruin: "The money has to last. A lifetime." Sometimes very little is required to stun. Prior to the fall of Lehman Brothers, it was outrageous to imagine being one step away from financial doom in spite of the millions one still possessed-as Birgit Brenner did in her sixth one-person exhibition in her gallery, Eigen + Art. Shown in the fall of 2007, it addressed the theme of poverty-also, perhaps, because she had been teaching for three years at the Kunstakademie in Stuttgart, where she has to explain to her students that being an artist is a difficult struggle, one which in all likelihood leads to poverty. Markedly different from her portrayal at Eigen + Art of the perfect

manager's perfect life with a sexy wife, a well-paid job, and great kids, which was overshadowed by the typical Brenner sentence "Not today."

This world-where the fall of the successful man was inconceivable because wealth provided political, economic, and social privilege and money guaranteed security-has since declined. The descent into poverty, which for a long time only haunted the average middle-class family, has since proven itself to be a veritable systemic breakdown in which anyone can fail.

Birgit Brenner's everyday is the "Death & Disaster" everyday of Andy Warhol and early Pop art. (Indeed, she is currently researching accidents on the Internet.) It's where events-or, in Brenner's case, thoughts and internal monologues-get out of hand that they become artistically relevant. Because it is only here, where events and thoughts get out of hand, where they become crude, headline-mongering, and melodramatic-where they become accidents in the broadest sense-that they are distilled into that brittle, idiotic precision that resists documentary or sociological access. And in doing so, they challenge all attempts to grasp hold of them aesthetically.

Birgit Brenner is interested in precisely this aesthetic grasp, which rephrases questions concerning betrayal and deception into questions of color, material, and scale-but also into a potential punch line, as in the self-negating reproach "You're lying, but keep talking." The artist is not the "feminine expert for interpersonal relationships" that criticism now and again tries to peg her as. While it's true that she often reduces life's cruelties to the personal drama of the crisis-ridden couple and women on the verge of a nervous breakdown, it would be a misunderstanding to imagine that Birgit Brenner is interested in the psychodrama. It merely serves her as a means of finding the image; this is why her works are based on the scene of the psychodrama and its actors; and this is why she works with a storyboard and labors over the Roman in großer Schrift (Novel in Large Typeface) (the title of Brenner's exhibition accompanying the Tisa von Schulenburg Award in 2005). Yet all these methods are part of the "brittle and highly precise layers of color, language, and form" which, in the words of the art historian Marion Taube, essentially characterize the aesthetic nature of Brenner's work.

Die besten Jahre (The Best Years) is the title of one of these brittle and highly precise layerings: piles of cheap lengths of wood and signs reading "Go Away," "I," "You," and "Repugnant," monumental photo prints of a bedroom, wall paintings, and a blue, star-shaped explosion of color merge to form an installation that is both monumental and sparse, evidently slapped together quickly and cheaply. Brenner was recently on view at Christiane zu Salm, who purchased her works and installed them for her About Change Collection on view in Heiner Bastian's Chipperfield-Haus. And Deutsche Bank has just purchased a series of ten drawings from this work group for its collection.

It might have something to do with current events that Die besten Jahre (The Best Years) are once again taking off. Birgit Brenner had already put up a triumphal show with this installation in 2005 at Eigen + Art. In Leipzig, of all places, on the occasion of the opening of the new and prestigious art location on the grounds of the former cotton-spinning mill-celebrated with much ballyhoo and key international collectors. It seemed inconceivable to expect anything but a large, representative exhibition of the New Leipzig School surrounding Neo Rauch, which if Eigen + Art did not invent, then in any case made big internationally. But then, instead of expensive painting, cheap wood was on view in the huge gallery space. And instead of Neo Rauch's illustrative/polemical maneuver against model-building modernism, one stumbled upon this fabulous plea for drab everyday life and tinkering slapdash. The texts tell of an ironic melodrama of relationship-tinkering with mediocre love; but also the no less ironic wonder of the slapdash in art, testified to by the installation and the large letters painted onto the wall: "The Best Years." For Birgit Brenner, these may have just begun. No irony intended.

Translation: Andrea Scrima