ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

ANDREA BÜTTNER

October 23, 2018 • Andrea Büttner on her iconographies of poverty

Andrea Büttner, *Shepherds and Kings* (detail), 2017, 35-mm slide show.

German artist Andrea Büttner has a long-standing practice of using appropriated imagery as a historical and philosophical tool. For the first time, three of Büttner's slide projections are being shown together as large-scale, standalone installations. "Shepherds and Kings," a solo exhibition of Büttner's work, is on view at Bergen Kunsthall in Norway until October 28, 2018. She is also participating in the São Paulo Bienal, on view through December 9, 2018.

I'VE LONG BEEN INTERESTED IN depictions of poverty. Considering how much we know about representations of wealth and power across centuries, there is astonishingly little research on poverty within art. We have no art history of poorness. For one of the slide projections in Bergen—titled *Shepherds and Kings*, from 2017—I compiled 35-mm slides of nativity scenes and juxtaposed portrayals of shepherds next to portrayals of kings. By studying the figure of the shepherd, I wanted to present an implicit iconography of poverty, and examine its connotations throughout history, both positive and negative. I placed these images side-by-side, working by comparison, which is a traditional art-historical approach that art historians would always use. So I emulated their methodology as a way to emphasize that I am, ultimately, assembling these images and making this work in order to fill an art-historical gap. I've just edited a book titled "Beggars."

My research into poverty comes from my extended study of shame within art and aesthetics. Shame is a free radical—it can be attached to anything. Poverty is certainly a source of shame, although this is historically contingent. In the nineteenth century, the poverty of workers wasn't so much a source of shame, but of rage—revolutionary movements couldn't have been drawn up otherwise. Any experience of shame with regard to class implies a belief in self-reliance and being the sole agent of one's own luck.

Monastic communities are a useful example of voluntary poverty carrying positive social connotations. This is, in part, what drew me to the Little Sisters of Jesus, a Roman Catholic community of nuns founded in 1939. The second slide projection, *The Archive of the Lives of the Little Sisters of Jesus with Circuses and Fun Fairs, Tre Fontane, Rome*, from 2012, displays photographs that the nuns took while working at these fun fairs and circusses around the world. I first showed this slideshow as a very small projection as part of my installation at Documenta 13, but here it really fills the space. The way these nuns devote their lives to contemplation and poverty within a context of spectacle, rather than missionary work, somehow resonates with twentieth-century artistic movements that embraced voluntary poverty—like Arte Povera in Italy, and poor theater in Poland. In these instances, it becomes laudable, even political, rather than shameful.

The third slide projection in this exhibition, *Stereoscopic slide show from the Whitehouse collection (mosses and field trips)*, from 2014, features images of moss and people examining moss. There are also stones growing live moss in the middle of the room. Historically, moss has been classified as a "lower," primitive plant, and contemporary biology classifies it as "cryptogamous," because it is so little, and because its sexuality is "hidden"; it procreates with spores instead of flowers. In a way, this hidden sexuality relates moss to my work with nuns. And while flowers are so relevant, art-historically, moss has not been given any aesthetic or cultural significance. As with poverty, I'm interested in this very contingent social judgment that takes place, even in biology. During the exhibition, the curators have to keep this live moss, this little lowly plant, alive and moist. It's a task that is officially beneath them, but that requires them to become what curators truly are, which is caretakers.

— As told to Juliana Halpert