Burcu Dogramaci

Art Behind Glass: Painting as an Examination of Photographed Painting

The Place of Painting

"With what kind of space does a painting surround the 'presence' it depicts? [...] Every painting begins with the word 'here.' But where is this here*?"*[1] *In his text "The Work of Art. The Place of Painting" from 1982, art theorist John Berger reflects on the relationship between painting, space, and time. In doing so, he distinguishes between the space in the picture and the space of what is depicted—and also includes the here-and-now of*

the artists. Berger's observations can be adapted for Karin Kneffel's series on Krefeld's Houses Lange and Esters. In her series of works created since 2009, the painter explored the interior architecture of the build- ings designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and the art collection of textile manufacturer Hermann Lange. The catalyst for Kneffel's view of and into Haus Lange was a bundle of historical photographs from the archive of the villa, which is now used as a museum. The photographs were taken in 1930 for the Berliner Bild-Bericht photo agency, although the authorship or name of the pho- tographer can not be ascertained.[2] *These interior shots include numerous works of classical modernism that Hermann Lange lived with in the 1930s and beyond. Today, the collection is dispersed. Works are owned*

by art museums such as Frankfurt's Städel Museum, the National Gallery in Berlin, and the Franz Marc Museum.

In her extensive engagement with the Lange Collection, documented only in the black-and-white of historical photography, Kneffel sought out works from the collec- tion in their new locations, also painting them in the

museal spaces of their artistic neighborhoods: the Zwei Tänzerinnen *(Two Dancers) by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner in the Franz Marc Museum in Kochel a. See (ill.p.28) or Robert Delaunay's* L'équipe de Cardiff *in the Van Abbe- museum in Eindhoven. In this way, the artist created with her paintings a meshwork or network whose nodes are formed by the various locations of the scattered works from the Lange Collection.*

In this respect, a process of multiple translations un- derlies Karin Kneffel's series on the Haus Lange: from black-and-white photography to the experience of the original artwork, and then to the (re-)painted painting and interior. Kneffel's painting thus has its place not only in the painted pictorial space, which she changes by emphasizing her own perspective; in the interiors she paints, the historical precursors are also considered. The artist thereby reflects on representational painting per se, which is referential and related

to a model but also generates after-images—either in the viewers or in subsequent artistic explorations. Accordingly, the place of painting is always simultaneously in the picture and beyond the pictorial space; it is present, past, and future.

Photography, Painting, Painted Painting

Karin Kneffel's work began by looking at the photo- graphs from 1930.[3] They show a deserted, soberly cool interior in which architecture, furnishings, and art exist in a pleasantly moderated dialogue (ill. pp.15, 34, 60). The historical photographs are very much in the tradition of architectural photographs from that time. Along with the increased visibility of architectonic modernism in newspapers and magazines, architectural photography played an important role as a multiplier. Photographs could promote a building or the architects, but they could also convey the aesthetic program of the

architecture through its own visual means.[4] The focus on structural form and interior design may explain why the architectural photography of the 1920s and 1930s often lacks people. The photographs give the interior and the collection their own space, which is not iden- tical with reality: what is shown is an ideal state that eliminates utility.

To this end, black-and-white pictures become a form of distancing, objectification, and infinite applicability be- cause the inventory of the rooms, i.e., the furniture and paintings, is uniformly immersed in a palette of gray tones. The collector nevertheless left behind traces that are above all formulated in the choice of furniture and the collection. The sculptures and paintings are distinc- tively placed on the walls and in the room. The interior of the functional building, with its cubic units, flat roof, and large windows, is surprisingly dignified. Carpets are laid out in the entrance hall (ill. p.60); heavy club chairs are arranged around a round table. A photo of the vestibule shows a female torso by Wilhelm Lehm- bruck and, on a dark wall, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's street scene Potsdamer Platz. *In the Lady's Chamber (ill. p.34), the furniture is reduced in form, but here, too, textiles on the windows and floors create a cozy atmo- sphere. Next to a Lehmbruck bust, numerous sculptures of small animals by Renée Sintenis are lined up in a glass case.*

Kneffel's paintings can be set in relation to these photographic pictorial spaces. With her painting, she balances out the possibilities of her medium, a medium that can explore, show, conceal, and alter: How does Karin Kneffel move away from these small-format pho- tographs in black-and-white? Whereas the photographs made for reproduction in the Berliner Bild-Bericht were presumably intended for hand-to-eye distance, Kneffel's

large formats (ill. pp.23, 73, 75, 81)—her paintings measure 180 x 220 and 240 cm, respectively—change the relationship between the work and its viewers, who have to stand either at a distance to get an overview or right up next to it to see the application of paint and small details. In addition, she introduces color by identi- fying the artworks

exhibited in the interior, visiting them on site, and giving them back their color (which was not included in the photographs) in her painting. Similar to the photographs, Kneffel's paintings have a smooth surface. In a time-consuming process, with a fine brush and thin application of color in oil paint, the richly de- tailed interiors of the Haus Lange were created.[5]

Although the exposure time of the historic photographs was probably relatively long—the photographs were probably taken with large-format cameras—Karin Kneffel needed many times longer to complete her paintings. The factor of size and the factor of time form moments of difference between the photographs and Kneffel's oil paintings. At the same time, the invention, the creativity, is a decisive contribution in the process of translation because Karin Kneffel added numerous details to her paintings that are not to be found in the photographs for the agency Berliner Bild-Bericht.

World behind Glass

To look at Karin Kneffel's paintings (ill.p.23) is to see a world behind glass. Drops with reflections, streaks, and iridescent light reflections accentuate what is ac- tually an invisible glass pane. The gaze must first pass through the liquid substances and the plays of light in order to look into the rooms, to see carpets, furniture, and the works of the art collection. In the process, the colorfulness of modernist painting—of an Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Oskar Kokoschka, or Marc Chagall—stands out against the gray monochrome of the interior, as if

Kneffel were choosing color above all wherever her brush encounters a painting of the past. At the same time, new pictorial personnel are added: In the Haus Lange, cleaning ladies do their work—and a man slips on soap suds as if it were a slapstick scene.

In another painting, additional objects are added: a burning cigar in the ash tray or a plate with slices of tropical fruit. The cigar can be read as an allusion to the architect Mies van der Rohe. In photographic por- traits of the aged architect, he often holds a cigar in his hand.[6] *In this way, Mies would not only be present by virtue of his interior design but also in the form of his attribute, the cigar. The tropical fruits are a motif that can be found in the Dutch still life of the seventeenth century as well as among the Impressionists, demon- strating virtuosity in painting and/or their functioning as a quotidian object now worthy of being painted. The cigar and fruit constitute the incursion of everyday life into the cool objectivity of the Haus Lange. Kneffel's painting brings together various, sometimes even con- flicting, elements into one pictorial space: the real situa- tion is present in her paintings to the same extent as the imaginary. She can freely add something to the canon of modernism, even to make asymmetries discernable. A painted armchair by Lilly Reich draws attention to the fact that the female architect, who lived in a life and work partnership with Mies, never had the same share of fame, honor, and influence.*[7]

In regards to the place of painting, John Berger writes: "To paint is to bring inside—

doubly: into the inhabited space around the image and into the frame. The paradox of painting is that it invites the spectator into its room to look at the world beyond."[8] The glass pane thus stands not only between the viewer and the painted interior but also between the interior and the

world outside—including the space outside the image. The glass pane inserted by Karin Kneffel permits varying interpretations: The glass itself and the droplets encourage detailed examination, but they are also disturbances, as reflections and water are elements of diffusion. But the mirror also produces an image; the mirror image can assume the function of a doppel- gänger.[9] Painted self-portraits were created for centuries primarily through self-exploration using a mirror image, until the camera became another way of reflecting

the self after its invention in 1839. In its early history, photography was described as the "pencil of Nature,"[10] which suggests an interpretation as a mirror of the world. The glass in Karin Kneffel's paintings would be a reference to the viewfinder and lens of the camera, which also focuses the world through glass. The glass through which one looks as part of the analog photo- graphic process nevertheless remains invisible in the photographic prints; it is a technical means of capturing the light. Karin Kneffel renders the glass visible and emphasizes that the gaze is always directed and that neither photography nor figurative painting is a mere imprint of reality.

Likewise, it brings the color of modernity into the quiet interiors of Haus Lange. As a result, the art develops a life of its own: The color emancipates itself from the form that is predominant in the historical photographs. At the same time, she occasionally moves the sculptures close to the foreground of the image (ill.pp.73, 80). The torsos seem to look at each other and communicate with each other and with the paintings. The fact that the works of the Lange Collection found a new environment in museum collections strengthens the emancipatory gaze on these works and conceptualizes them beyond a definition of art to understand them as the property

of an owner. In this way, Karin Kneffel's artistic research

into the whereabouts of the Lange Collection differs from that of research into provenance, which under- stands art relationally and places it within a history of changing ownership.[11] In Kneffel's case, the works are mobile actors that seem to move from one collection to another. There, they confidently locate themselves and celebrate their presence in brilliant colors.

The gaze of the painting into the past is thereby con- stantly addressed from the present. Karin Kneffel's series on Haus Lange and Hermann Lange's art collection asks how the seeing of the painter relates to the seeing of the historical photographs. In addition, not only the visible but also that which is not directly present in the room becomes integrated in the pictorial space: the collector, the architect, the art, and the artists.

1. *John Berger et al.: "The Place of Painting" (1982), in:* The Sense of Sight ed. by Lloyd Spencer, *E-book ed. Vintage International, 1993, p. 212.*
2. *The photo agency Berliner Bild-Bericht was founded by the photographer Wilhelm Niemann. On the Berliner Bild-Bericht and the photo coverage of another building by Mies van der Rohe, see Birgit Hammers: "Vom Dokument zur Legende – Zur Autorschaft der Fotografien des Barcelona Pavillons", in:* Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte, *2009, vol. 72, No. 4, pp. 545–556.*
3. *Cf. Julia Voss: "Gespräch mit Karin Kneffel in ihrem Atelier in Düsseldorf,"" in:* Still. Karin Kneffel, *Exhib. Cat. Kunsthalle Bremen 2019, pp. 84–94, here p. 90.*
4. *Cf. Burcu Dogramaci: "Stadt der Fotografie. Hamburger Kamerakünstler zur Zeit der Weimarer Republik," in:* Himmel auf Zeit, *pp. 259–296, here p. 266.*
5. *as in fn. 3*

6. *See, for example, the YouTube video "Mies van der Rohe_ smoking a cigar," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= wqBomNUY_0Y, accessed 2022.2.26. Cf. also Eefke Kleimann: "Fast flüssig," in* Still. Karin Kneffel, *Exhib. cat. Kunsthalle Bremen 2019, pp. 156–165, here p. 161.*
7. *Cf. Voss, Interview with Karin Kneffel, p. 89.*

8. *Berger, "The Place of Painting" (1982), in* The Sense of Sight. *p. 214*

9. *See, e.g., the silent film* Der Student von Prag *(1913) by Hanns Heinz Ewers, in which a student sells his mirror image and as a result creates an autonomously acting doppelgänger.*
10. *See the 1844 book* The Pencil of Nature *by William Fox Talbot, in which Talbot introduces his calotype photographic process.*
11. *"Die Provenienzforschung (also Provenienzrecherche, Provenienzerschließung oder Herkunftsforschung) untersucht die Herkunft und verschiedenen Besitzerverhältnisse eines Kulturguts," https://www.kulturgutverluste.de/Webs/DE/ Stiftung/Grundlagen/Wichtige-Begriffe/Index.html, accessed 02/25/2022.*