Cathrin Klingsöhr-Leroy

Trompe-l'œil: Time and Space in the Painting of Karin Kneffel

Glass panes full of droplets, fogged up, wet with moisture. Transparency obscured and offering resistance to our gaze. Colorful light reflections and blurred forms make us aware of seeing—make us feel our own perception as an active effort.

Karen Kneffel's paintings draw a sharp line between the space of the picture and viewer. In the tradition of trompe-l'oeil painting of centuries past, the artist marks the transition from reality to illusion by making us doubt what we see. Just as we are tempted to shoo away the fly that has perched itself on the overripe fruit of a seventeenth-century Dutch still life with a spontaneous gesture, we also want to wipe away the traces of water on the glass panes that push in front of Kneffel's painting, turn off the reflecting light, and get a clear view. But like the fly on the pomegranate, the droplets, the reflections of light, and the shadow zones are part of the representation.

They belong to the space artificially created by painting and yet lie beyond it, right on its border with reality. A glass wall separates the two areas. It becomes perceptible through seemingly natural phenomena such as the condensation that has settled onto it or the light that is reflected from it in the colors of the prism. These disrupting factors of observation refer to a kind of meta level on which the possibilities of the painted image are negotiated. Since the invention of photography, painting's potency and power of interpretation has been discussed again and again in confrontation with this new means of reproduction. The illusionary effect of both arts became controversial. By emerging superior from their comparison, photography enabled Western painting, so it seemed, to finally free itself from an obsessive realism and to return to its aesthetic autonomy. This view forced painting into abstraction; it not only forbade figuration and illusionism, but also prevented painting, if it ignored this taboo, from dealing playfully and interpretatively with the reality it reflected.

"How can we relearn," Michel Foucault asked in 1975 with an eye to Pop Art and hyperrealist painting, "not just to decipher or to appropriate the images imposed on us, but to create new images of every kind? Not just other films or better photographs, not simply to rediscover the figurative in painting, but to put images into circulation, to convey them, disguise them, deform them, heat them red hot, freeze them, multiply them."[1]

With her paintings relating to the Villa and the Lange Collection, Karin Kneffel has undertaken just that. She uses photographs of the interiors and enlivens them in a mysterious and playful way. The paintings and sculptures in the rooms of Haus Lange light up colorfully, change their position, or become complemented by interpolated works. We see them in new spaces and unexpected contexts, distorted and enlarged through close-up views. Through these manipulations, painting to a certain degree releases the artworks from the black-and-white photographs, liberates them from their original environment, and grants them a new appearance in other paintings, in other contexts.





Berliner Bild-Bericht, 1930 Haus Lange, Zimmer der Dame/Lady‘s chamber

Haus Lange, Flur im Obergeschoß/Corridor first floor 34

The memory of an art collection preserved by the photographs of the thirties and its presentation in a private house in Krefeld is updated by the intervention of the painter. Karin Kneffel is not merely drawing a line between reality and illusion; the space behind the glass wall takes on a temporal dimension. It represents a piece of the past. The way in which Karin Kneffel visualizes this past recalls Marcel Proust’s comparison between the development of a photograph and the in- voluntarily emerging memory. Just as the pictures taken with a camera only become visible when the negatives are developed, one will only understand the meaning of a buried memory after one has retrieved it from the depths of the unconscious and made it conscious.[2]

Although Karin Kneffel’s works about the Lange Collection are based not on negatives but on photographs that have already been developed, it is only through her reworking of these room photographs that the images come to life and reveal their meaning. In this way, a connection to the present is created. Kneffel applies markings to the invisible glass pane drawn in front of the pictorial space. With pastosely applied red paint, she frames a small painting that hung on the upper floor of the Villa Lange and that cannot be identified in the photograph. What painting was lost to the black square? Was it Paul Klee’s Spinnennetz? After the painter inserted this small painting into the photograph, she crossed it out again with her finger on the fogged pane and replaced it with the Fürst by Paul Klee (ill.pp.88, 89). The photograph is interrogated through the medium of painting, tentatively altered, its relation to the present put in question. What is the picture that is not recognizable in the photograph and where is it today?

Using a red frame, Karin Kneffel also highlights Marc Chagall’s painting Der Droschkenkutscher in the photograph of Haus Lange’s dining room Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s Potsdamer Platz in the photograph of the Villa’s living room is also highlighted in red. Both paintings reappear in other works by Kneffel in other contexts (figs. pp.27, 85, 87). They now hang in museums. Their journey from private to public collection is traced through the paintings. Slowly, little by little, the paintings and sculptures are released from the darkness of the past, becoming more vivid— illuminated anew.

In some works, Karin Kneffel adopts the opposite perspective: The rooms of Villa Lange, used as a museum since 1955, still seem inhabited. The view through the glass border shows us a warmly illuminated room (ill. p. 75). Der Weibliche Torso by Wilhelm Lehmbruck stands in its original place. Paintings from the collection hang on the walls; on the right edge of the picture, a green curtain; in the foreground, tulips in a vase, a pair of glasses placed on an

opened book. Time seems to have come to a standstill. Apart from a few details, everything appears as it used to be. The dining room with paintings by Juan Gris and Marc Chagall is lively: green plants in the foreground, the Gugelhupf on the table. Everything points to the presence of imaginary inhabitants who could be observed by us through a large window. Lamps are depicted on the pane as white spheres; gray stripes are the shadows of a blind: Both make the viewer's space also become tangible. The particular current moment in which we see the picture is combined with a view into the past that tentatively lends Kneffel's painting an atmosphere of domesticity.



2015, 180cm x 160cm



2022, 180 x 240cm

Karin Kneffel combines her painterly research on the Lange Collection, on the path of the works from the private ambience of a Krefeld villa into public spaces, with a reflection on the perception of images. Through the glass border that separates the space of the picture from that of the viewer in her paintings, she turns the process of seeing into a conscious act. By transforming the photographs of Haus Lange, enlivening them with light and color and playfully enhancing them with invented images and objects, she renders the past present. She brings to our attention the transformability and inventiveness of painting, showing us how it is possible “not simply to rediscover the figurative in painting, but to put images into circulation, to convey them, disguise them, deform them, heat them red hot, freeze them, multiply them.”

Cathrin Klingsöhr-Leroy 2022

1- Michel Foucault, “Photogenic Painting.” Gérard Fromanger: Photogenic Painting = Gérard Fromanger: La Peinture photo- génique, Foucault et al. Black Dog Publishing Limited, London 1999, p. 89.

2- Brassaï, Marcel Proust sous l´empire de la photographie, Paris 1997, p 173