

The Aspect of Conservation

A carpet rolled up in bubble wrap, cushions single packed and piled up in the corner of a room, and on the other side, a canvas stretched over with shiny silk has in its centre an abstract paint daub - on the one hand stowed away artworks primed for their upcoming transportation and on the other an experiment that is put on hold. I am in the flat and studio of Vera Drebusch in Cologne, home to her intriguing textile works, and the site that enables her creation of new work via a trial-and-error method. In our talk, I wanted to learn more about her approach and what drives her fascination in textiles.

Curator Franziska Wilmsen in discussion with artist Vera Drebusch on her textile-based and other works, April 2017.

Franziska Wilmsen: Already in your early works, such as Premium-Kissen (2014), or the carpets Enjoy the Silence (2016), and Nichts als die Wahrheit (2015), you have worked intensively with textiles. How do you engage with such materials in your work, and how far does the choice of material generate or play into the works' meaning?

Vera Drebusch: Actually, I come from a background in photography, but I find textiles very versatile. It is all about surfaces and contact. It combines many different aesthetics and materialistic intensities. In contrast to photography and painting, one is able to encounter textiles by touch and not just by sight. As fabrics come into close proximity with, and up against, our very skin, the border between everyday object and sensual medium begins to dissolve. This level of meaning is highly appealing to me at the moment. For me, textile as a medium provides the perfect vehicle through which to encounter traces, signs, and other parts of our everyday imagery. It's this very connection to everyday life that also attracts me to work with fabrics. I find fashion exciting in how we communicate through our choice of clothing - textiles appeal to me in their flexibility: they can be engaged with to achieve functional and aesthetic ends, or to convey political content.

FW: Your carpet work Enjoy the Silence (2016), which you made from taffeta, is not used in its traditional sense; rather, it is separated from its original function. The carpet presents to us uncomfortable contents in an abstract form: a satellite image of the tank training area in Munster. However, one is tempted to sit down on it as it does look comfortable. Furthermore, the piece becomes an exhibit that shall not be touched. Is it that very interaction that you are aiming at within your works?

VD: I believe that because people are aware of a carpets multi-sensorial function. On the one hand, its decorative function, on the other, its functioning to facilitate warming effects, for example. It responds to other senses but the eye - it is not only an image carrier. Although the carpet could also be mounted on the wall, I decided to lay it on the floor to alter the perspective of the viewer. When a work of art is attached to the wall, it is usually somehow above the beholder's perspective, or at least becomes a counterpart. On the floor, it becomes something one encounters from above. The viewers' area of movement becomes limited, as the carpet they are denied to touch claims the space. In contrast to photography, it is exciting to see that despite intended rules, the materiality leads people to touch the piece anyway and to engage with it differently. Perhaps this raises a contentious point for anyone potential buyers: its intervention within a space as part of the interior rather than as the classic image to go up above the sofa. Actually, I am not driven by what would be attractive for collectors or buyers, but I am excited by the idea of the path a piece of art takes beyond my creating it. The use of a carpet as image carrier for the motif of the tank training area was also interesting for me as, similar to photography, a carpet also works to conserve. In general, the aspect of conserving plays a major role for me in my use of materials.

FW: Do you already know what your new textile works will be about? For your exhibition at Schloss Ringenberg you create two parts: on the one hand, you work with silk and on the other, with towels, which have been made at the textile mill in Bochohl.

VD: As exhibition spaces, the castle and its Wappensaal have a very strong character that call to be confronted. The wood panelling with its painted arms and the sheer size of the rooms are very attractive features, which play into the work. What struck me when I inspected the castle were all those different components combined in one place, for example, the traditional flag in the registry office against the backdrop of nature. One literally only has to take a few steps before encountering animals and landscape, which is quite a romantic idea to me.

I am going to make three flags which will deal with the formation of flocks of birds. The motifs will be embroidered onto shimmering silk. Driving the piece for one part, my aim is to create a strong contrast, and for another, I expect the embroidered formation to appear abstract. I think the viewer will recognize the flock of birds at some point but it is not immediately

legible what all this is about. In fact, that corresponds to a flock of birds in reality: the moment one does recognize the formation, it changes and vanishes, making it barely possible to encounter any such formation in the same way again. Further, I am curious about the different materials. However, it is not yet clear how the combination of silk and embroidery will contribute to the way in which the textile falls, how the soft fabric will react to the close embroidery. The flags will be installed on classic flag stands, in place of the usual show of national flags or flags of the country.

FW: For both scientists and artists, swarm intelligence, the technical term for collective or group intelligence like a flock of birds, remains a continuous source of fascination. How do you conceive such topics?

VD: Well, there are many topics that have occupied me over the years; swarm intelligence and the formation of birds stands as an example of this in particular. I have created a large archive of photographic and graphic material, and I gradually conduct material research in connection with the particular subjects. I have dealt with embroidery before and also worked with silk. When I am invited to an exhibition at a specific place, much previous work and the various contexts from which they derived come together in the creation of a new piece. All the strands become total, if you will. It just so happens with my second work for Ringenberg. For quite a long time, I was thinking about working with textiles and screen prints. Screen printing, instantiated as a medium of reproduction, enables printing endless copies of the chosen motif. I am planning to employ that technique in an absurdly 'elitist' manner, by making simply one single copy of each mesh. To this end, and in striving to achieve a certain aesthetic, I am printing on cotton towels. When the sleek colour film encounters the dull towels, the ink is somewhat soaked up; here, the material and technique perfectly assimilate the topic of flooding.

I wonder what happens if nature does what it wants? What kind of aesthetic charm could lie in a natural catastrophe like a flooding? Using images of water or nature as templates for screen prints works well for me. And, of course, the realisation that the Schloss Ringenberg region had been hit by extensive flooding a few years ago greatly played into shaping that that specific place.

FW: In addition to your textile works and book projects, we are also showing two projections of Repetitives Element (2010), a series of video loops that show the flowing motions of water in abstract patterns. What is the idea

behind this series and how did you develop the work?

VD: I can't say exactly when I started the series, maybe around 2010. Repetitives Element results from the time when cameras became cheap given the rise of the smart phones' allowed for non-stop filming and taking pictures, no matter where you were. I really liked the fact that I was able to buy used, 'bad' cameras with a low number of pixels, which for me provided an interesting aesthetic I could play around with. They've been pushed further into the background of our consciousness, in line with water, a natural part of our daily life. At the same time, water always stands as an indicator for its immediate surroundings and local particularities. It reflects weather, light, and wind. It literally copies its environment and, in doing so, becomes a portrait of that place. Thus, Repetitives Element deals with various aspects of movement, temporality, and surfaces.

FW: When speaking about the portrait of a place, or the copy or print of that place, are your videos, then, an aesthetic means to explore the ways of water?

VD: Primarily, it is a structure survey - not in a natural scientific way, but more in how it works as an image. That is relevant to me. The design of the loops is, however, almost sloppy. I admit that to myself. It is refreshing to break out of that self-constricted conceptual corset and to experiment a little with the spontaneous moment. The significant work happens when the projection is adjusted to the exhibition space. It requires some time on site to see which video works out best with regard to place and dimensions.

Interview featured in:

Herbert Ploegman and Franziska Wilmsen (2017). They called this place a stronghold. Accompanying publication within the plugin programme at Schloss Ringenberg. Hamminkeln (DE).