

GALERIE KAMM

KATE DAVIS Ranziges Fett

OPENING FRIDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2011, 6 – 9 PM

EXHIBITION OCTOBER 29, 2011 – JANUARY 14, 2012

In 1977, Joseph Beuys' work, *Fettecke in Kartonschachtel* (Corner of Fat in Cardboard Box) from 1963, which consisted, as its title suggests, of a mound of opaque fat resting on a layer of grey felt in a cardboard box, became rancid. Displayed in a plexiglass case, the fat melted under the exhibition lighting; turning dark and greasy, it emitted a foul stench. The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam had purchased *Fettecke in Kartonschachtel* in 1972 and faced with the work's transformation five years later, it was decided that a replacement area of fat would be made. This decision was made without consulting Beuys and the replacement material was developed by the museum's sculpture conservator, using fats that would be less likely to decompose again. Naturally, this case has provoked much controversy and debate, bringing into question how the maintenance and historicisation of artwork relates to the artist's original intent, the work's authenticity, and its authorship. Taking the problems and possibilities inherent in the notion of Beuys' decomposing sculpture as the starting point for this new exhibition, *Ranziges Fett* addresses the way in which my own re-visioning of art historical material might converse with examples of museological conservation, examining the divergences and resonances between the two.

Questioning how to bear witness to the complexities of the past, my practice is an attempt to reconsider, reclaim and reinvent what certain histories could look, sound and feel like. This has often involved responding to the aesthetic and political ambiguities of historical art works and their reception. In *Ranziges Fett*, conservation provides an ambivalent metaphor for what it might mean to care for the past, and how that may relate to my own practice. Along with the example of Beuys' *Fettecke in Kartonschachtel*, issues of conservation relating to works by the artists Alina Szapocznikow and Diego Velasquez, are crucial to this exhibition. *An Ethical Imperative (Journey)* and *An Ethical Imperative (Dessert III)* draw from documentation of sculptures by Szapocznikow in various states of repair and decay. In their original forms, both of Szapocznikow's works, *Journey* (1967) and *Dessert III* (1971), demonstrate her exceptional ability to reconfigure and re-imagine elements of the female body through unsettling, visceral means. Propped and prodded on the conservator's operating table, the bodily qualities of both sculptures are animated in other ways than is possible when exhibited intact. By drawing into, and onto, images of these works in a transitory condition, I am seeking to question how we might 'see' and interpret the work anew through a context which is normally hidden from view.

Curtain I - VII (Die schönste Frau in der Geschichte der Mythologie) is a series of seven prints

referencing militant suffragette Mary Raleigh Richardson's slashing of Velasquez's painting *The Toilet of Venus* at the National Gallery, London in 1914, and the subsequent concealment of that act. Richardson's legendary incisions have been historicised as her protest against the re-arrest of the suffragette, Emmeline Pankhurst, yet the details and emphasis of each account vary greatly and the damage has been carefully repaired by conservators. Richardson gave this public account of her actions: "I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the government for destroying Mrs Pankhurst, the most beautiful character in modern history. Justice is an element of beauty as much as colour and outline on canvas." Repeatedly photocopying documentation of the damage Richardson wrought on the painting, I re-inscribed the reproduction of Richardson's slashes in pencil, leaving Velasquez's painted outline of Venus to deteriorate as it is repeatedly and mechanically copied. If the mark of a pencil is an addition (however impermanent and susceptible to erasure) and a cut is a fissure (equally susceptible), *Curtain I - VII (Die schönste Frau in der Geschichte der Mythologie)* questions whether Richardson's lacerations could be re-imagined as inscriptions? Or reparations? As additions rather than as removals - or both? If a cut provides a curtain, what can we see beyond it?

Kate Davis, 2011

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