

# Daimler

## Art Collection

Photography, Video, Mixed Media II  
Daimler Contemporary, Berlin  
December 9, 2004 – February 27, 2005

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Vorwort

The Daimler Art Collection was initiated in 1977, and has now grown to include about 1300 works by over 300 German and international artists. At first it concentrated on classical panel painting, then from the early 1990s Hans J. Baumgart, who directed the collection for many years, started to incorporate media works in the broadest sense, regularly, and with great clarity of focus. This includes prestigious works by artists like Nam June Paik, François Morellet, Walter Giers, Christian Megert, Michael Wesely, Pietro Sanguineti and others. For some years this—overall still narrowly based—photography, video and Mixed Media section has been extended rather more energetically. One factor here has been the collection's basic tendency towards constructive, minimalist and conceptual trends as signposts through the overwhelming range of media art since about 1960. Another factor is that site-specific considerations have played an important part: in Germany we have paid particular attention to contemporary art developments in Stuttgart and Berlin, and at the same time acquisition planning has taken a long-term look at cultural developments in Asia, Africa and South America, where Daimler is a major presence.

The current exhibition includes about 60 works by 27 artists, and concentrates on two key themes: Modernism's critical revision of styles and utopian designs for one, and secondly socio-political reflections. One of the most intelligent and radical œuvres in terms of

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'refocusing' the abstract avant-garde was created by the Geneva artist John M Armleder from about 1970 on. His provocatively decorative *Furniture Sculpture* consisting of a monochrome picture and two circular lamps effectively sums up how art and design have crossed each other's borders in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We have placed Bojan Sarcevic's photo-collages close to Armleder in the exhibition; these examine the post-war Modernism's ideal image of rational building closely, critically and with relish. Next to him are Mathieu Mercier's systematic distortions and reconfigurations of classical style forms between Mondrian and New Bauhaus. The Israeli artist Uri Tzaig's minimalist games table seems to bring us closer to the Schiller-like ideal that play without any specific purpose is the apogee of cultural development for the human race. Sylvie Fleury's post 1990 videos form part of a piece of broadly based media research from a decidedly feminine point of view, presenting the alternate exploitation and undermining of the claims of 'high' art and 'low' fashion awareness as a 20<sup>th</sup> century sign.

Of the total of six artists with biographies linked to Stuttgart or Berlin, Ulrike Flaig's wall object clad in iridescent car paint in particular can be seen against the background of a balancing act between artificial showpiece and functional object. The Berlin/Stuttgart artists Thomas Raschke and Sebastian Rogler, operating under the 'Das Deutsche Handwerk' label, charge their subject matter with political explosives from Michel Houellebecq's successful novel 'platform', which has a whiff of scandal about it. Bernhard Kahrmann's drawings are intended to be read in a broader sense as graphic analyses of socially determined spatial constructions. Works by Sandra Hastenteufel and Eva Teppe seem to fit in with the classical genres of photography and video art, though both are definitely arguing from within the conceptual tradition.

Three South African artists provide essential accents for the second key topic in our exhibition—socio-critical and political reflections. Guy Tillim, like Jane Alexander one of the winners of the Mercedes-Benz Award for South African Culture, which has been announced since 2000, is represented by an impressive series of photographs of young Kamajoor militiamen. With Jane Alexander's monumental ten-part series *African Adventure* they form one of the high points not just of South African photographic art, but generally within committed contemporary photography. The large-scale double projection *Snow White* by Berni Searle, who lives in Cape Town, is similarly significant for video as a medium. The lightbox by the Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar, well-known since his 1987 documenta appearance as one of the major socio-critical concept artists, pays tribute to Gandhi's grand design for a non-violent revolution, but at the same time asks questions about a possible redemption of this utopia. Jaar's work is linked with that of Martin Gostner, Dmitry Gutov, Thea Gvetadze or

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Patricia London Ante Paris: they all consider the fact that language and image are used more for self-deception, obfuscation and deliberate falsification of history than they could be a medium for liberated encounters with one's own and the alien self.

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Speech for the opening of the 'Photography, Video, Mixed Media' exhibition,  
Daimler Contemporary, December 8, 2004

The French composer Erik Satie's 'Musique d'ameublement' created a critical scenario as early as the 1920s for tearing down boundaries he felt were maintained artificially between art and life. In pamphlets that have since become famous he proposed music that was highly functional, intended to cover embarrassing gaps in the conversation at dinner or at openings, as well as unpleasant background noise. Satie had already pointed out critically that music in department stores, which was played by live musicians in those days, was just simplified arrangements of concert music. In a letter dated 1920 he referred to the musical climate of his piano piece 'vexations' (1893), which proposes 840 repetitions of two rows of notes. "We now want to introduce music that satisfies 'useful' requirements. Art is not one of these requirements. 'Musique d'ameublement' creates oscillations; it has no other purpose; it plays the same role as light, warmth & comfort in any form." Satie used fragments of music by his colleagues Ambroise Thomas and Camille Saint-Saëns for his kind of 'musique d'ameublement' in the Paris Galerie Barabazanges. According to reports by contemporary witnesses the experiment went wrong: Satie could not stop visitors listening to the music. John M Armleder's artistic approach is still quite significantly shaped by the 1960s Fluxus movement's anarchic delight in experiment and undogmatic openness. He feels that Satie's 'Musique d'ameublement' concept already anticipates all 20<sup>th</sup> century art's key decisions: art—this would be one way of interpreting Satie's concept of 'furniture music'—no longer draws on personal experiences, nor on qualities that can be described objectively and are 'eternally' valid. It is part of a communication structure that is interlinked in a variety of ways, tendentially embracing every aspect of 'high and low' society. From the outset, Armleder has taken art's economic and aesthetic evaluation and reevaluation processes as given, not to be denied, but to be worked on further, pushing back the boundaries. He has coined the term 'refocusing' for his approach: the formal arsenal and modernistic ideologies of abstract avant-garde movements are constantly reappraised and tested to see whether they are fit for contemporary forms of cultural added value. Here Armleder uses the sphere of art—from the individual artistic decision via the processes of museum standardization and canonization to the trivialization of art in commercial formats—as a model for general cultural and economic processes.

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The Daimler Art Collection has acquired an important series of works by John M Armleder in past years, including the classic *Furniture Sculpture* consisting of a monochrome image and two circular lamps that forms a kind of center for our present exhibition. This provocatively decorative picture object seems to sum up the borders crossed by 20<sup>th</sup> century art and design, from De Stijl and Bauhaus via Minimal to the visual overkill of contemporary hysteria about design and presentation. In concrete terms, image and object refer to the alternate exploitation and interpretation of art and spatial design of the kind that started to become internationally accepted in the 1950s. The image paraphrases the classical American Color Field Painting of artists like Barnett Newman, for example, in its form and color scheme. To the extent that the ensemble plays with the religious triptych type and the lamps' frontality triggers associations with rose windows and haloes, the two ceiling lamps are also commenting ironically on the transcendental claim of Newman's art by both presenting it demonstratively and exploiting it to gain their own enigmatic charge. Duchamp and Malevich, anti-art and ideal aesthetics—the two great opposites of 20<sup>th</sup> century art—have come together in John M Armleder's work as a smoothly functioning unit. The idea of the 'new' gradually devalues itself before our eyes, the battle-lines are drawn up and art becomes a comment on itself.

The observations about Armleder's *Furniture Sculpture* also provide the background for the works, shown alongside, of a younger generation of artists born around 1970. This includes Bojan Sarcevic's photo-collages, which relish a critical look at post-war Modernism's rationalist building. With precise incisions, he dissects a whole variety of different ornamental structures out of the original photographs and puts them back into the originals in different positions. Fifty years have passed since the magazine BAUMEISTER published its unpeopled rooms, ideals of functionalistic post-war Modernism, in an issue published in 1954. The artist's contemporary eye interprets them as images serving a socio-political rhetoric, as two-dimensional, empty and futureless as the rosette-shaped ornaments on the ceiling lamps in Armleder's *Furniture Sculpture*. Sarcevic's collages combine the 'cut with the kitchen knife' in the Dada tradition with the elegance of distanced acknowledgement over and beyond time and space: in art history, the ornament was the particular and excessive characteristic of art in fields that had no real content, and so were just pure forms.

The stylistic principles of Modernism—with all its intellectual, spiritual and ideological implications—, read as the superficial ornament of the contemporary will to decorate: Mathieu Mercier's systematic distortions and reconfigurations of classical stylistic forms between

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Mondrian and New Bauhaus, could also be interpreted in this spirit. The minimalistic games table offered by the Israeli artist Uri Tzaig is reminiscent of Schiller's ideal that play without any specific purpose is the apogee of cultural development for the human race. Once one person, or two people, or four, spread the colorful marbles out on the games table's organic pimples they become part of a game that obeys purely aesthetic rules, without winners, losers, or rules. But we may also be permitted to remind ourselves that developing the mathematical-cybernetic theory of games made it possible to determine the optimal conditions for optimally effective games-playing in advance by calculation, which can also apply to behavior in organized groups, in conflict situations etc.

Sylvie Fleury's work is driven by comparable ambivalence: oscillating between unemotional analysis of human dependency within self-created value systems on the one hand and slapstick-style exaggeration of attitudes and taste-judgments arising from this. She has been producing videos since about 1990. These are part of her wide-ranging media research, which presents the alternate exploitation undermining of the claims of 'high' art and 'low' fashion awareness as a 20<sup>th</sup> century sign, from a decidedly feminine point of view. Armleder's 'refocusing', a constant reappraisal of Modernism's ideologies and utopias to both trace and destroy their boundaries—this also defines the young French artist Jerome Saint-Loubert Bié's attitude. His photographic revision of one of the most famous photographic exhibitions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the legendary Stuttgart 'Film und Foto' show in 1920, provides a contemporary foil for the historical proclamation of 'New Seeing'.

Three South African artists set the direction for the second key theme in our exhibition—socio-critical and political reflections. Guy Tillim, like Jane Alexander one of the winners of the Mercedes-Benz Award for South African Culture, in existence since 2000, has been travelling through the crisis regions of southern Africa since the mid 1980s. His impressive series of photographs of young Kamajoor militiamen, photographed in Sierra Leone in 2001, with Jane Alexander's monumental ten-part series *African Adventure* is a high point not just in South African photographic art, but generally within committed contemporary photography. What do we see when we look at Tillim's photographs? Young colored men in ceremonial clothing, their faces attractive, open, proud, with a trace of child-like shame? Or African soldiers in garments 'consecrated' by ritual, ready to do anything dictated to them by being placed between the warring fronts of revolutionary and government soldiery? Or children's faces, full of fear and a craving for closeness at the same time, growing up into a brutally fissured, schizophrenic society that makes it impossible to establish any sense of identity?

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The theme of irreparably distorted, fissured identity that can still be continually redefined is also central to the work of Berni Searle, who lives in Cape Town and is internationally acknowledged as one of the most important video artists in South Africa. Two video projections placed opposite each other show a black woman with flour and water trickling down on to her from the ceiling. We witness a transformation, as the flour and water mixture lightens the skin color. Berni Searle becomes ‘colored’ for the second time, to use the language of South African apartheid. Her deliberate repetition and performative emphasis of her own identity reflects that artistic approach: Searle grew up as a ‘colored’ because of her biographical background, in other words she was not part of either the white minority or the black majority of the population. Berni Searle’s art is dedicated to an attempt to reinvent herself constantly within historically determined, collective categories, in order to present herself “as a diverse, changeable being” (Berni Searle). She deliberately uses her own body in performative video works in order to set the presence of an individual that rejects social platitudes against the concept of race.

“It is about the following: nowadays people talk all the time about law and justice, the state, national and international matters, public opinions and public power, good and bad politics [...] the individual and collectivity [...] One of the greatest evils of the day is the considerable incongruity between the meaning that accrues to all these questions at the present time and the coarseness and confusion of terms relating to what these words present” (José Ortega y Gasset, *El Hombre y la Gente* (Man and People, 1957). Martin Gostner’s view and use of language links the skeptical awareness of the way in which concepts and statements can be manipulated and ideologized with the above words. The meaning of a word depends on cultural coding, on our experience, of its position in the context of a sentence or a text. Martin Gostner’s cycle of digital prints works against all these basic conditions of language as an interindividual communication medium. Isolated terms, or terms that only apparently make sense when put together, are typed on to a normal sheet of sticky labels and illuminated by a ‘searchlight’ from the computer’s graphics program, dramatically and ominously. Serial arrangement, enervating repetition gives the terms a certain charge, but devalues them on the other hand—rather like the effects of amnesia, political agitation, advertising or the monotony of a rosary. The terms are robbed of history and meaning, their impact is like that of empty labels that can be applied to anything.

*He Ram (Gandhi)*—a light-box by the Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar, known since his 1987 documenta appearance as one of the most important socially critical concept artists, might

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stand as a monument to Mahatma Gandhi's overwhelming vision of a non-violent revolution. But history and today's political reality have encumbered Alfredo Jaar with the form of a gravestone. The title of Jaar's work relates directly to the moment of the successful assassination attempt to which Gandhi fell victim as an advocate of non-violent resistance in 1948. "He Ram, He Ram" (Oh God, Oh God) are said to have been Gandhi's last words. "I think we live in a great paradox today. On the one hand we are bombarded by thousands of images, but on the other hand it has never before been so controlled, be it by the government or by a certain part of the private sector. Therefore, I believe that we have lost the ability to see and be moved by images. Nothing moves us anymore, nothing has any meaning. My work is a kind of poetic meditation about the power of images." (Exhib. cat. Documenta 12, 2002)

This entirely pessimistic basic insight links Jaar's work with those by artists like Martin Gostner, Dmitry Gutov, Thea Gvetadze or Patricia London *Ante Paris*: the fact that language and image are used more for self-deception, obfuscation and deliberate falsification of history than they could be a medium for liberated encounters with one's own and the alien self. Patricia London *Ante Paris*'s work in recent years has been defined by critical updating of anarchistic texts and raising ideological and critical questions in the fields of philosophy, politics and sociology in relation to power and violence. Part of this over-arching context is that protest forms are addressed, along with deviations and gestures of resistance by individuals, within a social context that is determined culturally and economically—whether it be in South Africa, Chile or Germany.

Of the total of six artists with biographies linked to Stuttgart or Berlin, Ulrike Flaig's wall object clad in iridescent car paint in particular can be seen against the background of a balancing act between artificial showpiece and functional object. The surface of Ulrike Flaig's wall object *Eben mal kurz untergebracht ...* seems at first like intangible material, comparable with mist or light. The form of the object makes us shift between the categories 'functional design object' and 'art object'. The reflections refract the surrounding space, which makes the form difficult to define. So how concrete is form if it is countered by or dissolved again by its surface? The color pigment was originally developed for the motor industry. Its iridescent quality (from green to blue and black) turns into the opposite when used on cars: the guardians of the law felt that because witnesses found it difficult to define the color confidently an incalculable risk factor crept in, and so the shade was rejected. Bernhard Kahrman made a name for himself in Stuttgart in the 1990s with one of the most varied multi-media work concepts on the interdependence of linguistic, graphic, architectural and—derived from these—political spatial constructions. In contrast with this, the starting-point for

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the works of Beate Terfloth, who lives in Berlin, is directly physical experience and interpretation of categories like space, boundary, body and landscape. Lucid exercises on the subject of color by Anita Stöhr Weber, who lives in Berlin and Neckarwestheim, appear only in the catalogue (they had already been shown at an earlier stage). Works by Sandra Hastenteufel and Eva Teppe seem to fit in with the classical genres of photography and video art, though both are definitely arguing from within the conceptual tradition. The three works or series of work by Sandra Hastenteufel in our exhibition demonstrate her hard-edged change from micro- to macro-perspective: plants like rhubarb, wood garlic, or acorns veiled in foliage, taken from a distance of a few centimeters, reveal an apparently 'creaturely' and 'natural' formal quality, while the ballet dancer observed in the video camera's zoom seems to have become paralyzed: an artefact that demands nothing but purely aesthetic projection mechanisms.

(from the publication: 'Photography, Video, Mixed Media II', Stuttgart/Berlin 2010, pp. 2-3; 6-10. You can purchase this book online.)

**Daimler Contemporary**  
**Haus Huth Alte Potsdamer Str. 5 10785 Berlin**  
**daily 11 am - 6 pm**

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