

Daimler Art Collection

'Outside Europe'

Stadtgalerie Kiel

25 March – 28 May 2006

Renate Wiehager

For the opening of the 'Outside Europe' exhibition
Stadtgalerie Kiel, 24 March 2006

Esteemed ladies and gentlemen,

In the mid-1990s, one would have described the character and key areas of the Daimler Art Collection in terms of a collection of abstract 20th-century avant-garde artworks with a distinctly European emphasis. As the company has become more international, however, we have worked systematically to relate the art collection to international developments – but without losing sight of our fundamental focus on geometry, construction and minimalism.

In 1986, Andy Warhol provided a brilliant impetus for the collection to move beyond the European perspective. The artwork he was commissioned to create to mark the company's hundredth anniversary – the *Cars* series of pictures – went all over the world, and provoked the question of how this new accent

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should be handled in terms of conception. As a consequence, by the end of the 1990s selected works by American contemporary artists had been added to the collection. An additional new perspective was opened up by the international support programs for young art. This started in Japan in 1992 with the Art Scope prize, which was joined in 1999 by the Mercedes-Benz Award for South African Art and Culture. In 2005, Daimler inaugurated a prize for graduates of the famous Cranbrook Academy of Art, Detroit. These activities have created a small-scale but select network of globe-spanning support for young artists, providing important preconditions for our collecting concept of recent years. After all, if these support programs are to be given a real foundation in the company and this special commitment is to be communicated to as many of our employees as possible, then the best way is through contact with the artworks themselves.

Over the past five years, we have focused on building up a collection of Japanese art created approximately between 1960 and the present day, which now totals around 20 artworks. We have also acquired approximately the same number of artworks in connection with our South Africa art support prize. Examples of photography and video art by Indian contemporary artists have recently been added. You may notice the absence of Chinese contemporary art – especially since Daimler began production in Beijing last fall. However, China's art scene grew so explosively during the 1990s that it will take another year or two for me to properly develop an overview. Only then will it be possible to make out those trends in Chinese contemporary art that are suitable for intelligently supplementing the organic character of the Daimler Art Collection. So, as you see, ladies and gentlemen, our current exhibition 'Outside Europe' has also given us occasion to shine a spotlight on a question that is continually being put to us: on what basis do we decide which new artworks to acquire for our corporate collection? As the exhibitions held here in Kiel over recent years have shown, we continue to pursue the abstract constructive focus linked to our collection's Baden-Württemberg roots – via recent developments in the media of the image, object art, photography and video. That is, I observe exhibitions, art fairs and publications – and, above all, I speak to people involved with art a

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great deal, and travel – in order to see how young artists internationally are developing the traditions of Bauhaus, geometric constructive art, minimalism and Neo-Geo and taking them into the future. The second focus is linked to our various international corporate locations, and is visible on a large-scale here in Kiel for the first time. This second focus involves taking a close look at recent art developments in Asia, India, Australia, and South Africa – and above all in the USA – in order to find works that complement and round out the character of our collection.

Against this background, let me take you on a tour of our current presentation. Mercedes-Benz has been in India for fifty years, and S-, E- and C-class vehicles have been rolling off the production line at Pune for ten years. The world watches the explosive growth of IT and software firms, call centers and outsourcing industry with fascination. Indian culture, also, can no longer be denigrated as ‘Bollywood’ culture; over the past years, India’s art, music, theatre, literature and film have attained international standards. Contemporary art in India is, above all, figurative. The content is significant. It is political. This is reflected by the five collage-type photographic works by Pamela Singh, a former Miss India, whose affairs with English politicians created a scandal in the early 1990s and who is now one of the scene’s most outstanding photographers. The large-scale video installation by Shilpa Gupta, who was born in Bombay (today known as Mumbai) in 1976 and lives in New Delhi, gives us a view of future developments. The installation, which must be animated by visitors using a mouse, shows young women dressed in camouflage uniform – something that has been picked up by the fashion world and turned into the ‘camouflage style.’ It is always the artist herself, fusing hip-hop dance and military formation. At the same time, she reminds us that a few years ago, India was embroiled in crushing conflicts on the borders with Pakistan and China, and to some extent still is.

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The central spaces are dedicated to Japanese art. The emergence of art in post-war Japan and its connections with international developments in abstract art, minimalism and concept art are represented in our selection by the intellectually refined reduced pieces of Arakawa and Kazuo Katase and by the highly complex sociopolitical analyses of Keiji Usami. A photo taken during the race riots in Los Angeles of 1965 provided the starting point for Usami's grand painting. In Usami's art, race nation and world are rendered as differently colored profiles, which are transformed into 'layered pictures' via logical operations. Usami's system of signs reflects the relationships of individuals and community as elementary forms of existence in cartographic representation. The youngest generation in Japanese art is represented by Ayumi Minemura, who has been working under the pseudonym 'Are You Meaning Company' since 1999. In her processual artworks, she investigates Japanese society's social dislocations and self-conceived images. *Two Getting Along* represents an offer or invitation to think about how coexistence – in friendship or in a partnership – is structured. By means of a table, drawing instruments and template drawings, this project animates people to participate and to address the intimate, social space of the home in their own way.

Ladies and gentlemen, American art – once again, colored by our interest in the realm of abstraction – is represented by typical artworks from the period of 1960 to the present day, which I would like to present to you in a quick summary. Looking back to the craftwork traditions that were an important source of inspiration for American abstract art, we acquired two quilts or wall hangings created by the Amish People, circa 1890. Next, one sees the textures and structures of pictures created circa 1960 by Karl Benjamin, Alexander Libermann and Frederik Hammersley. Additional important representatives of American minimalism (very significantly influenced by European models) include the stripe picture by Gene Davis and the wonderfully lively large-format picture in pink and green by Oli Sihvonen, a student of Josef Albers. Younger art is present in the video artworks and images of Kirsten Mosher, in the *hommages*

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to the design of the SLR by Vincent Szarek, which gleam with car bodywork paint, and the meditative image grids of Michelle Grabner.

Following this excursion into more than one hundred years of American abstract art, visitors can immerse themselves in the narratives and figures, the spirituality and topical critique of two Georgian artists. Gia Edzgeradze and Tamara Khundadze – born in 1953 and 1970 respectively – represent a major, significant tradition in Georgian painting that remains practically unknown to us. Both have been living in Germany for many years; notwithstanding this, what speaks to us out of their pictures is the breath, the skill and the expressive power of an Old Master painting – in their case, closely linked with Far Eastern spirituality. Tamara Khundadze goes further by undertaking a new, feminine interpretation of our times, transforming images from the media through painting and through selective cutting. Only at first glance do the women appear to be confined and restricted by the power of male dominance – a second glance makes it clear that the women are exerting mastery over the scene through subtle power and presence.

I would like to conclude my tour of the ‘Outside Europe’ exhibition with a few brief remarks on the small selection of South African contemporary artworks. These are included in connection with the Mercedes-Benz Award for South African Art, which was inaugurated in 1999 and plays an important role in Daimler’s activities for the promotion of culture. The idea behind this initiative, which offers the most generous cash prize for young artists in South Africa, is to support talented upcoming artists from all branches of art and culture in South Africa and to assist them in becoming recognized at a national and international level.

Guy Tillim, who was born in Johannesburg and currently lives in Cape Town, has been traveling through crisis regions in Africa with his camera since the mid-1980s. The impressive sequence of photographs of young Kamajor militia

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members that he took in 2001 in Sierra Leone, together with Jane Alexander's monumental ten-part series *African Adventure*, represents highlights not only in terms of South African photo art, but in terms of enthusiastic contemporary photography in general. What do we see when we look at Tillim's photos? Young men of color in ceremonial dress, their faces beautiful, open and proud, with a trace of childlike shyness? Or African soldiers in ritually 'blessed' garments, prepared to commit any act dictated by their position between the war fronts of revolutionaries and government soldiers? Or children's faces, full of fear and a desire for closeness all at once, their lives shaped by a split, schizophrenic society that makes it impossible to find their own identity? The question is left open.

An irreparably distorted, split identity – which is nonetheless constantly open to being defined in new ways – is also a central theme for Cape Town-based artist Berni Searle, who is internationally recognized as one of South Africa's most significant video artists. Two video projectors, placed opposite one another, show a woman of color. Flour is drifting down on her from the ceiling, whilst water drips down at the same time. One witnesses a transformation, as her skin is lightened by the mixture of flour and water. For the second time, Berni Searle becomes – in the language of South Africa under apartheid – a 'colored.'

The Mercedes-Benz Award 2002 was presented to South African sculptor Jane Alexander. Her photographic series *African Adventure* shows Long Street in Cape Town, where the artist lived in the 1990s, with photographs of her sculptures inserted by computer. This street contained a mix of businesses, bordellos, criminals, displaced criminals and the drug scene, all of which disregard the controls imposed in the name of apartheid. The title references the names of travel agencies in central Cape Town that offer trips to see national sights, but with 'adventure' read as implying danger and threats. Anyone who explores these ten panoramic photo collages becomes part of the South African reality of today just for a moment, in the way that Jane Alexander

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sees it, in factual terms, and as she feels it. Both realities – the internal and the external reality – merge in these photo collages.

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