

Sandow Birk, *Standing Down (Ferguson)*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 76.2 x 121.92 cm



"After the Fact: Propaganda in the 21st Century"

Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus
30.5. – 17.9.2017

Upon entering the subway station Königsplatz, where the Kunstbau occupies a long oblong hall, the viewer first encountered a project by Khalil Rabah (*1961), in the form of a polished stone slab bearing the text THE PALESTINIAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY AND HUMANKIND. The artist's imaginary museum – here represented by an oversized plaque – was founded in 2003 and has been disseminated through an ever-expanding variety of outlets, including exhibitions, booklets and newsletters. Akin to Lebanese artist Walid Raad's performative archive *The Atlas Group* (1999–2004), the project engages in the identity struggles of Rabah's homeland even as it invokes the complicated political baggage of the Western museum.

Including around thirty artists who seek to dismantle the affective economies that drive today's media landscape and political debate, "After the Fact" examined the concept of propaganda. According to the curatorial statement, the term was mobilized as an "analytical framework" which might help to reappraise the contemporary "post-truth era". A reader and a series of lectures accompanied the exhibition, whose claim was that the past century has altogether seen an increasing number of situations

where so-called alternative facts dominated the discourse. However, a second avenue laid bare the links between propaganda and public relations, which emerged in the early twentieth century and drew from both psychoanalysis and models derived from strategic warfare. The rectangular hall was divided into sections, in each of which artworks and documents were assembled by theme – "will to freedom and creative industry: languages of power," for example, or "gender stereotypes". These areas were interrupted by narrow compartments in which films, newspaper clippings, and iPads were provided to further engage with the material, at times debunking fake news or juxtaposing the aesthetics of politics and advertising. Yet, the exhibition rarely merely *showed* something; instead, it grouped and framed material ranging from newspaper front pages from the day after 9/11 to TV clips promoting the introduction of the Euro in 2001. Several of the artworks in the show seemed hampered by this desire to contextualize and classify, among them Harun Farocki's video *Ein neues Produkt* (2012). In his understanding of film-

making as a political act, Farocki made it a principle to investigate form rather than content. In a way that seemed difficult here, his sharply arranged images invite us to turn away from the clichés that usually inform our ways of looking. A central piece in the exhibition was Jonas Staal's (*1981) *New World Summit Berlin*, a project first presented at the Berlin Biennial in 2012 but here taking the form of a small architectural model, video documentation and a wooden rack bearing the flags of groups that are excluded from democratic debates, such as the Kurdish Women's Movement. The accompanying reader features his manifesto "Assemblism" (2017), which calls for collective action – a "new collectivity" – to eventually produce new signs and infrastructures that contest the distribution of political power. Like Rabah's Palestinian museum, Staal's transdemocratic forum mobilises the possible in favour of the factual and stretches our understanding of the real. As much as either of these projects, the Kunstbau itself here became an arena for the negotiation of identities and the (re-)writing of history. And this made it all the more striking that only a small share of the works in "After the Fact" offered perspectives on the future, discuss models of resistance, or made pro-



posals for the role of artistic practice in today's affect-loaded debates.

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