

I've got Kompost Fever

by Natalie Hegert

Kompost

Substitut

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There is something so incredibly satisfying about composting. Accumulating natural waste materials from kitchen scraps to garden clippings, mixing it up, watering it, making sure it has a healthy population of bugs and worms and the right proportions of brown and green leaves, and then letting nature go its course. It's so very fulfilling to see the process of waste materials--all your banana peels and carrot tops, spinach stems and limp celery--turn into nourishing, fertile soil. I remember the first batch of compost I made successfully. I showed my entire family a pile of the rich, dark brown earth, and announced proudly "Look at this dirt that I made!"

Isabelle Krieg's show at Substitut Berlin is entitled *Kompost*, and whereas I made a pile of dirt, Krieg has created a moving, absorbing and virtuosic series of artworks touching on the subject of natural, organic materials and their relationship to the totality of existence. Her treatment of the matter is understated and tender, and the works themselves are just gorgeous.



Walking hurriedly in the rain past the gallery on Torstrasse, I glimpsed inside, and the first piece stopped me in my tracks. A collection of various household items, chairs and bookshelves, coffee mugs and statuettes, had been coated with a layer of rich dark soil, and from that soil the slenderest blades of grass were beginning to emerge, literally growing in the white box of the gallery. As if an entire living room had been ejected from its previous shelter and forgotten outside--all the materials we find necessary for living now provide life for a more simple organism.

The walls in the other rooms of the gallery are not so white and institutional, rather have been stripped of their paint, leaving exposed the many layers underneath, showing the duality of decay and construction, and providing the exhibition with a very pleasant and fitting ambience. Each work requires a double take, beginning with the series of pressed leaves hung in frames on the wall, with what looks like holes eaten out by insects. Those holes are in fact precisely rendered world maps. The detail is just marvelous, the sentiment touching.



Krieg's talent for detail and artistic prowess is further revealed in a second installation, on a rather unassuming collection of dirty dishes stacked on a bus tray. Peering into the soiled cups we find immaculately executed portraits formed from the leftover remains of coffee and foam, taken directly from images found in the daily newspaper. The technique is astonishing, sparking quite a lively debate among us as to how exactly the detail was achieved, but the installation goes beyond the technical, remarking on our daily consumption of images and their subsequent disposal.

Krieg continues to surprise us with her photographs of ceiling lamps, hung upside down and close to the floor, resembling instead plants or blooming flowers. A simple gesture and total reversal, above them she's then created ceiling lamps made from loaves of bread, further showing her deftness at blurring the boundaries of the inanimate and organic.



A smaller room off to the side is in darkness but for a single overhead lamp hung low, directly over a small table with a dark table cloth, strewn with salt and pepper shakers. The holes in the tops of the shakers spell "S" or "P" and the low slung light--reminiscent of an interrogation setting in detective movies--cast through the holes, projects the letters onto the surface of the salt and pepper. The outline of a plate, now removed, and the evidence of her work is seen in a circular formation of salt granules and pepper powder, resembling a solar eclipse on the dark tablecloth. Then you notice that some of the shakers don't read "S" or "P", but the tops have been altered to read different letters, making up the phrase "eigentlich wollte ich etwas anderes" (actually I wanted something different), suddenly infusing the artwork with a pathos, an ennui and a reserved sense of tragedy.

The skill with which Krieg can move between conceptual and emotive, the everyday and the universal, not to mention her brilliant artistry and sensibilities of installation and use of materials, makes Kompost a beautiful, total work of art. Whereas so many contemporary exhibitions require a guide in the form of an artist statement in order to decode and explain the works, Krieg's works do something I'm not used to--they speak for themselves. The connection and the empathy we feel toward them comes from an intrinsic, fundamental

level. It feels...soulful.



The only disappointment in the show is the last room, in it only a sculpture from a pervious series *Milchstrasse*. It doesn't quite fit with the spirit of the rest of the installation, and it's dissatisfying to see a room go to waste when the other works are of such high caliber. But despite that, nothing can put a damper on the overall effect of the exhibit--it's so exciting to encounter work like this. Makes me wonder, why had I not heard of Isabelle Krieg before? Truth is, she's hasn't exhibited Stateside yet. So my plea goes out right now: somebody please put this girl in the Whitney Biennial, or get thee to the Guggenheim.

--Natalie Hegert

(*Images, from top to bottom: Isabelle Krieg, *Krieg ist aus*, installation with furniture, soil and grass, courtesy of the Artist. Isabelle Krieg, *Weltblätter*, leaves, courtesy of the Artist. Isabelle Krieg, *Unerledigt II*, coffee cups, bus tray, courtesy of the Artist. Isabelle Krieg, *Abendbrot*, bread, lightbulbs, courtesy of the Artist. Isabelle Krieg, *Eigentlich wollte ich etwas anderes*, salt and pepper shakers, courtesy of the Artist.)

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