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Emarrassment of Riches

In her prints, paintings, photographs and videos, Andrea Büttner explores poverty, community and her philosophy of ‘little works’ by Brian Dillon
"Beauty is an object's form of purposiveness as it is perceived in the object without the presentation of a purpose." Thus Immanuel Kant, in *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), attempts to delimit the scope of the beautiful and runs straight away into vexing counter-examples—works of art not least among them. What are we to do, he wonders in a footnote, with the stone artefacts often discovered in ancient burial mounds? They look like tools, so have a purpose, but that purpose remains unknown. Are they not, then, beautiful? Not in the philosopher's current theory of beauty. "We have no direct liking whatever for their intuition." A tulip, on the other hand, we consider beautiful, "because in our perception of it we encounter a certain purposiveness that, given how we are judging the flower, we do not refer to any purpose whatever."*  

Tulips and stone axes are just the start; empirical examples proliferate in *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and they have a habit of working against the purpose of Kant's own text, which is to prove the pure and disinterested nature of beauty. Consider, for instance, his reflections on more charm (as opposed to real beauty), which is frequently to be found superimposed to the object; charm arrives in the degraded form of decoration. In painting, sculpture and architecture, ornament is secondary to design—we should not mistake the charms of a gilt frame, nor even the pigments in the painting itself, for the beauty of form or composition. That would be, Kant writes, as if we paid more attention to the spirals and curlicues of Maori tattoos than to the proportions of the faces on which they appear.

Enlightenment exoticizing aside—New Zealand and Australia had lately furnished European writers with new images for 'primitive' others—such examples are always curious, even embarrassing, in a work of philosophy: a discipline that tends to forget or deny its literary dependence on imagery and anecdote. In Kant, these moments actually resemble those secondary charms that he would like to banish from the realm of the beautiful. But a critique of aesthetic judgment can hardly do without actual objects; they decorate Kant's writing like so many jewels, they grow on it like mosses.

What would happen if you took literally Kant's rhetorical illustrations and turned them into pictures? That is precisely what Andrea Blütner has done in *Images in Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment* (2018), a set of eleven large prints on which images called from diverse sources, including Kant's own library, purport to illustrate his text. (The piece, accompanied by an illustrated edition of Kant's treatise, was first shown in Blütner's solo show at Museum Ludwig, Cologne, in 2014. It is currently featured in the British Art Show 8.) So, the tattooed Maori is therein an 18th-century engraving, the tulip in a botanical illustration, the stone tool in a photograph of a museum artefact. There are the statues and paintings one might expect to accompany Kant's discussion of the beautiful, the classical ruins and erupting volcanoes that go with his reflections on the sublime, but the illustrative project has over-shot, absurdly, its avowed end because here, too, are anonymous gardens, 18th-century women in their finery, geometric forms that just happen to have been mentioned in the Critique, even examples of Blütner's own work. Anything at all that suggests an image has been translated into graphic, painted, drawn or photographed form. And, while there is an echo of the encyclopedia, the effect is also to cut the philosopher's abstraction down to size, to collapse aesthetics into the everyday, the mundane, the image dump of Google searches and Wikipedia.

The literal-minded but learned comedy of *Images in Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment* is of a piece with the simultaneously high and low concerns of Blütner's earlier work. The Stuttgart-born artist, who currently divides her time between Frankfurt and London, has made work in a fluxmmering array of registers and media. She is perhaps best known for her woodcuts, but also produces prints and etchings, paintings on glass, photographs and video, raw canvas paintings whose fabric brings to mind uniform and monastic habits. Her recent 'Phone Etchings' (2018) are coloured renderings of the smears and gory blurs of nifty primitive mobile phone screens. Blütner's sculptures include gobbets of unfired clay, apples piled in gallery corners, museum-style benches made of plastic crates and planks of wood. What all of this work has in common, and in common with the Kant piece, is a consistent urge to impoverish or, rather, to reveal the wealth in poverty, the dignity in shame and embarrassment, the conceptual richness hidden in the empirical.

There's a clue to the lowering, if not lowly ambitions of Blütner's art in a text-only woodcut from 2005, which boldly states: 'I want to let the work fall down.' Blütner turned to the woodcut in the 1990s, when, as she once noted, it seemed a decaying 'unco' medium, too bound up with the inheritance of artists such as Georg Baselitz. Now, she says: 'I like having one area where I can be physically engaged, working with an angle.
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...industry involves everyone taking an interest in what everyone else has done; the labour involved, and the finished objects, are both solitary and collective, instances of a rigorous but joyous form of being-together.

There are nouns elsewhere in Büttner’s work. For another video, Little Sisters: Luneberg Ostia (2012), she filmed women from the Little Sisters of Jesus who are based at an amusement arcade outside Rome. 'We are people of the spectacle,' declares one of them to camera. In an earlier sound piece, Corinna Ringe (2006), Büttner invoked the pop art activist Sister Corita Kent, whose slavering serigraphs borrowed their language from theology, pop music and the avant-garde. Kent – who eventually left her order, the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, in 1968 – is another instance of an artist whose work is hardly separable from the mundane, from life itself. Büttner seems to be drawn to these figures, and whole communities, who conspicuously carry on a labour, worship or practice that is determinedly minor.

Among the unexpected links made in Büttner’s work is that between the idea or practice of ‘little works’ and, at some apparent remove, a quite recondite field in botany. Between 2011 and 2014, she pursued research at National Museum Wales, Cardiff, among its renowned and extensive collection of mosses. These lovely plants, which do not flower, were classified by Carl Linnaeus as reproducing asexually, by ‘hidden marriages’: they seemed to have been ‘excluded by the creator from the theory of stamens’? A secretive and modest sort of plant, then, but also a ubiquitous one. Büttner’s research led to ‘Hidden Marriage’, an exhibition at the museum in 2014. The mosses reminded her of the dust flourishing on Marcel Duchamp’s Large Glass (1915–23), photographed by Man Ray as Dust Breeding in 1921. A degraded but transformative stuff, in other words. In German, moss is a slang term for money: ‘Ohne Moos, nie los!’ (Nothing happens without moss.)

Büttner’s Cardiff show also included works by Gwen John – an artist once quite overshadowed by her brother Augustus – whose drawings and paintings accord with Büttner’s attachment to ‘little works’ and a certain Catholic context. (In 1911, John moved to the Paris suburb of Moudon, where she repeatedly drew men and other worshippers at her local church.) Büttner’s reference to a historically rescued or retrieved artist like John is part of a pattern of engagement in her work with ‘minor’ artists and neglected forms. The first work of art she recalls seeing was a large woodcut by HAP Grieshaber, installed in the secretary’s office at her convent school. (Grieshaber had taught the maids to make woodcuts.) In 1982, Grieshaber showed his work at a school for teenagers with learning difficulties. Büttner appropriated photographs of the students viewing the exhibition for her own HAP Grieshaber: Franz Führmann: Engel der Geschichte 25: Engel der Duldenden (HAP Grieshaber: Franz Führmann: Angel of History 25: Angel of the Disabled, 2010). The faces, she says, remind her of people painted by Hans Holbein the Younger and his contemporaries in the 16th century.
The historical citations have continued in Büttner’s more recent work, *Plato Decorations* (2014) is a video installation that reenacts the documentary history of mostly male artists (Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik, Ron Vautier) attacking pianos: an avant-garde gesture that is also an (inadvertent) assault on the gendered history of the instrument. Büttner’s “Piano” woodcuts (2013–15) involve dismantling a piano and using its parts as printing blocks: an altogether more modern and meticulous sort of violence. Neither Büttner’s art-historical references nor her theological interests ought to suggest that here is a polite or constrained practice. There is scatological and scurrilous impulse in some of the work that is entirely appropriate to her concerns with poverty, shame and encouraging the work to ‘fall over’. In partial homage to the plain, dust-buried garb of the Franciscans, Büttner has painted gallery walls brown as high as she could reach, creating, as she puts it, a ‘shit space’ for her art to inhabit. At times, she makes the link between shit and riches comically clear: ATAM (2013) is a photograph of a cash-machine keypad smeared with an unknown brown substance it might be food or it might be faeces. Diamantetroll (Diamond Troll, 2010) is a plain white Monobloc chair – Büttner has photographed many of these – on which rests a small brown nugget: it is actually a rough diamond, but it sits on the pristine white plastic of the chair as if to say: one of us is pure and, therefore, beautiful, but neither is going to tell.

2. ibid.

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Andrea Büttner is an artist based in London, UK, and Frankfurt, Germany. This year her solo exhibitions have included Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA, and Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Germany. Her show of installations, *Ruggers and iPhones* opens at Kunsthalle Wien, Austria, on 8 June. Her work is also included in the British Art Show 8, in Norwich, UK, Ga ‘June—a September’ and Southampton, UK, (8 October–14 January 2017).