

Katrin Korfmann

Katrin Korfmann, Bare Context

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It is interesting to think of how the relationship between a work of art and its frame, or its context, has evolved. If we take a look back there was a time when the selection of a frame (the physical frame of a bi-dimensional work) and the mounting was fundamental for the painter or for the collector. Or we may recall how the noblemen hired artists to design pictures for a specific room in their houses, for the library, for the smoking or the dining room, or even for the garden. On the other hand, it is true that art has moved several times through history, from caves to temples, to the interior of noble residencies, and from there to museums, galleries and urban spaces.

Although this relationship frame-work has existed from the moment in which man started producing art (let's recall the koan, "How can you describe the sound of a falling tree if there is nobody to listen to it?"), the discussion about this is much more recent. It might have been initiated by the invention of the ready-made. From the moment that the criteria expanded to the point of which any object may be categorized as an artwork by the artist's decision, it became necessary to define the elements of this simple choice for it to have a response in the art world.

In recent years, the author Nicolás Bourriaud has spoken about this problem in terms of the Relational Aesthetics, which described broadly, is the theory of an art that works with the relationship artwork-audience-context. A key example is the work of the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, which seeks for its audience to inhabit his installations. Through windows and mirrors they look at themselves as central elements of the piece.

In the case of the piece by Katrin Korfmann that I saw in a street kiosk nearby the old academy of arts in West Berlin, the context had been bared. Using white pieces of forex in precise shapes and sizes, the artist had covered every object that was on sale at the shop. The image looked like a blue print, as the one that could have been drawn by the person who was planning which articles would be sold and the organization of them in the space of the shop. We don't know what labels or types of cigarettes are on sale, but we can see the furniture destined for these products. We can see the silhouettes of the clothes hanging on their hangers, but we don't know if the clothes have the colour or design that is fashionable in that precise moment. We see that there are posters hanging on the windows without knowing what they are advertising. We can see where the newspapers should be but we don't know what the headlines are.

Although the mystery I am describing is actually a fantasy, the truth is that anyone that had spent enough time in the city in which the kiosk is located (that is similar to other cities) knows the main cigarette brands sold in town, the way most people dress, and even the brief advertising campaigns that regularly inundate the streets. We can play mentally with our memory putting the missing images of the products that are covered in white forex, aided by all the trivial information that thanks to advertisement occupies space in our heads, making a commercial kiosk the most predictable place in the world. The temporal emptiness of the objects makes evident their daily presence.

The same artist produced a series of photographs that may be read in a similar manner. They are also images in which she takes the content out of its context. The series is called Artspaces and consists of a collection of photographs taken in show rooms. By digital edition, Katrin took out the works exhibited, baring the white walls that now work as the background of the visitors' portrait. These visitors are the ones who listen to the tree falling, and without the presence of a tree our attention focuses on their act of listening. The peculiar image of these characters looking at nothing with attention is more than just ironic. The people seem to have gone to the gallery to experience some kind of meditative trance observing the white walls. And at the same time the piece works inside a permanent cycle in which the artist watches the watchers who will later watch her photographic works and themselves through them.