

Christopher Williams

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Christopher Williams, *Blocking Template: Ikea Kitchen (Three-quarter)*. Studio Thomas Borho, Oberkasseler Str. 39, Düsseldorf, Germany, September 10, 2022, 2023, ink-jet print on cotton rag paper. Installation view. Photo: Robert Heishman.

German playwright Franz Xaver Kroetz and his 1972 radio play *Inklusive* (Included)—a seven-scene script, adapted from a travel brochure, that recounts the activities of a West German couple on an all-expenses-paid trip to Italy, performed by actors with Bavarian accents—were the organizing force behind Christopher Williams’s exhibition “Radio/*Rauhfaser*/Television.” This presentation furthered the artist’s examination of postwar class issues in Germany and the aesthetics and conventions of *der typische Deutsch Kleinbürger*, or the typical petit-bourgeois German.

The Neubauer gallery is a small, oak-paneled room, accented by a stately limestone fireplace, nestled within an imposing Gothic-style building. The exhibition was anchored by six white-painted steel vitrines designed by Egon Eierman, which together formed an authoritative island in the middle of the room. Each case displayed a collection of

historical documents, scripts, and arcane printed ephemera alongside a selection of Williams's illustrative, collage-like works made with ink, adhesive tape, and photographic imagery. Each piece appeared archive ready, overlaid with a sheet of protective translucent vellum. The artifacts and art displayed within the shallow, linen-lined stands were obliquely relational to one another, connected only through Williams's fastidious research into Kroetz's life and work in theater. Yet the shifts between German and English, image and text, commercially produced print media and rarified cultural oddments refused to allow the exhibited objects to coalesce as a unified body of knowledge. Among the featured items were a May 21, 1973, copy of *Der Spiegel*, the cover of which depicts an image of a fetus that accompanies an article addressing the social and psychological impact of abortion; a black-and-white photograph of the ivy-covered edifice where Kroetz's *Inklusive* was created; file folders containing paper-clipped pictures of the equipment used to record the radio play; yellowed newspaper clippings; and a reproduction of a Candida Höfer photograph torn from an exhibition catalogue. All of this was uniformly arranged to underscore the ideological forces and mundane cultural conditions shaping Kroetz's output.

The treatment of this material was aesthetically bureaucratic, in line with Bernd and Hilla Becher's deadpan photographic grids of architectural banality. The project also called to mind the Joseph Beuys-influenced photography of Anna and Bernhard Blume, artists a generation older than Williams who also explored the modest tastes and conventions of the German lower and middle classes, but with a tongue-in-cheek sense of theater, emotion, and humor. Williams's cultural artifacts, methodically handled with administrative constraint, were further manifested in the architectural prosthetic next to the vitrines. This freestanding prop wall—with a cutout doorway that led to nowhere—inelegantly obscured a portion of the fireplace and the gallery's donnish oak-paneled interior. The wall's outer face was covered with the show's namesake *Rauhfaser*, an unremarkable oatmeal-colored wallpaper once common in East German homes. *Blocking Template: Ikea Kitchen (Three-quarter)*. Studio Thomas Borho, Oberkasseler Str. 39, Düsseldorf, Germany, September 10, 2022, 2023, a saturated industrial photograph of golden *frikadeller* frying on a cutaway skillet, hung on top of the wallpaper to the left of the doorway. The image highlights the pan's sturdy construction and allowed consumers to see the meat patties getting evenly browned. Conveying the seductive pleasures of hot sizzling flesh, the photograph usurped the fireplace as the gallery's central hearth.

Installed on opposite walls were two text-based enamel-on-glass works. *MODEL* (David Zwirner, 34 East 69th Street, New York, NY 10021), 2020, and *Untitled (Provisional Prop)*, 2021, feature brown, sans-serif typefaces that perfectly matched the gallery's wood paneling. In the lobby were two adjacent video monitors that listed the key elements of the exhibition. *Provisional Prop: Wall Coverings, Radio, Printed Matter, Picture Frames, Photographs, Films, Arrangements*, 2021, played on one screen while the other presented a 1973 German newscast that ran in place of a panel discussion, produced for West German television, about Kroetz's 1972 theater production *Oberösterreich* (Upper Austria)—the recorded conversation never aired, owing to the playwright's Communist activities. Kroetz and his obscure yet critical output are worthy of historical resuscitation

and aesthetic analysis; however, Williams doesn't provide us with an easy entry point into the artist's history. Like his photographs of scrupulously bisected camera lenses that reveal their mind-boggling construction, Williams's "portrait" of the artist, while frequently exacting, remained utterly elusive.