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Critical Melancholia

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with a footnote on the idea of natural history in Jack Smith

an exhibition organized with
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30 August - 7 October 2023

The exhibition has developed from conversations about a particular motif in critical theory. It involves thinking about the relationship between nature and history in a way that is complementary to many contemporary debates. Indeed, most discussions of recent critical theory emphasize the need to read nature in terms of history. From gender and queer studies to political ecology, the focus is on raising awareness that nature is not given to us independent of its social and historical constructions. The figure of thought that stands in the background of this exhibition, on the other hand, proceeds the other way around: it reads the constructions of history under the sign of their natural decay, that is, as transient.

Under the heading of “natural history,” this figure of thought, largely forgotten today, had an important position in early critical theory, especially in the works of Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno. It was as much a part of the critical understanding of the relationship between nature and history as the other one was. Indeed, both perspectives - reading history in nature and nature in history - were dialectically intertwined. However, the idea of reading the constructions of history as ciphers of their own transience explains the alliance that early critical theory saw between melancholia and critique. This affinity of melancholia and critique also seems largely forgotten today. Wherever melancholia is currently being debated, it is mostly as a subject of critique. In the respective discourse, melancholia appears in close proximity to depression and is criticized as a pathology that is accompanied not only by a problematic internalization of conflicts, but also by a narcissistic turning away from the world. In contrast, the critical melancholia whose recall stood at the beginning of this exhibition is emphatically oriented towards the world. The melancholic gaze to which the historical world presents itself in the light of its own transience dissolves the semblance of standstill in what is and opens it up to becoming. Yet the perspective of change implied here arises not in spite of, but precisely because of the insight into the finitude of all that exists.

The works assembled in this exhibition respond to this idea of a critical melancholia. Some of them are selected older works, while others are new ones that were developed from the discussions that led to the exhibition as a whole. The result not only reveals resonances between critical theory and aesthetic sensibility, it also opens up a variety of dialogues between the works and between different dimensions of critical melancholia: the works keep faith with the world in presenting in ruins what has taken on the semblance of the unquestionably given. They undermine the dichotomy of nature and culture. They side with failure and decay. They tenderly inhabit the ripped

backsides of progress. They seek the irreducibly human in the tattered and forgotten thing. They find dignity and strength in the insistent remnant or focus on the breathtaking beauty of the ephemeral. Yet it is precisely this sensitivity to the melancholic beauty of transience that lets the glamour of strict negativity - the promise of a different, better life - shine through. If you are willing to see it, there is glitter in a drainpipe...

The starting point for the idea of this exhibition was my text on the motif of natural history in Jack Smith, which - including a new annex - was made accessible again in the book "Camp Materialism" published 2020 by Galerie Buchholz.¹ Accompanying this exhibition is an expanded checklist with texts on each work.

– Juliane Rebentisch

Juliane Rebentisch is Professor of Philosophy and Aesthetics at Hochschule für Gestaltung Offenbach/Main. She is a member of the Research Council at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt/Main and a Regular Visiting Professor of the German Department at Princeton University. She was president of the German Society of Aesthetics (2015-2018) and vice president of HfG Offenbach (2014-2020). In 2017, she was awarded the Lessing Prize of the city of Hamburg. Her main research areas are aesthetics, ethics, and political philosophy. Publications include: *Aesthetics of Installation Art* (Sternberg 2012); *The Art of Freedom. On the Dialectics of Democratic Existence* (Polity 2016); *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst zur Einführung* (Junius 2013); *Der Streit um Pluralität. Auseinandersetzungen mit Hannah Arendt* (Suhrkamp, 2022).

¹ Juliane Rebentisch, *Camp Materialism*, Galerie Buchholz, 2020