

KERSTIN
BRÄTSCH
INNOVATION

Accompanying booklet
on the exhibition

**KERSTIN BRÄTSCH
INNOVATION
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KERSTIN BRÄTSCH. INNOVATION

“Innovation” is the first survey exhibition of the Hamburg-born and New York-based painter Kerstin Brätsch. In her work, the influences of the digital age are coupled, in a unique manner, with a reflection on art historical traditions. Her complex and consistent work oscillates between a conceptual analysis of painting and a devotion to painterly processes, always with a notable openness to a wide range of media and points of reference. Brätsch both reflects pop cultural and technological influences, and revives archaic craft techniques.

Given the exuberant proliferation of digital images, continued faith in painting may seem almost anachronistic, particularly with respect to certain aspects, namely the assumption of authentic and direct artistic expression, and the desire to seek out an identifiable artistic subject. Against this backdrop, Brätsch proposes targeted “detours” that invite us to embark on a nuanced critical engagement with precisely these questions. She creates portraits that represent no one particular person, but are instead based upon projections of personality (created after visits to psychics). She isolates the brushstroke—that classical signifier of the artist’s “hand”—and enlarges it, allowing it to pass through a variety of series and media, like a reproducible “sample.” She frequently collaborates with craftspeople, drawing upon their skills and knowledge to expand her own artistic range.

Featuring more than one hundred works from 2006 to the present day, “Innovation” offers for the first time a comprehensive insight into Brätsch’s work, which not only encompasses oil paintings on paper and Mylar film, but also marblings, glass works, and, as collaborations with fellow artists, slide-projection series, installations, and performances. Kerstin Brätsch does not consider her works as isolated or static, but rather as objects of exchange and interaction. This is also reflected in her numerous collaborations. Thus, alongside works by Kerstin Brätsch, the exhibition also features contributions by and with DAS INSTITUT (with Adele Röder), Full-Fall (Davide Stucchi and Mattia Ruffolo), Gaylen Gerber, Jane Jo, Allison Katz, Alexander Kluge, KAYA (with Debo Eilers), Kathrin Sonntag, and UNITED BROTHERS (Ei and Tomoo Arakawa).

The title, “Innovation,” is derived from an advertising slogan used by the Hamburg-based compressor company Brätsch. It seems to perfectly encapsulate the expectations of a first survey exhibition: the pressure to prove oneself and to continuously introduce to the world new works and ideas. One of Brätsch’s strengths is her ability to expose these types of mechanisms and expectations with great humour and clarity.

0.1 & 0.2 | PAINTING AND (DIGITAL) TECHNOLOGY

The visual universe of Brätsch Compressors sets the tone for the exhibition: an advertisement poster for the firm dominates the entrance area, its corporate communication serving as the blueprint for Kerstin Brätsch’s promotion of her own exhibition. The first gallery is likewise dominated by large, airbrushed wall paintings of the firm’s compressors.

These are accompanied by paintings from Brätsch’s “Fürst Fürst” (2009) and “Corporate Abstraction” (2010–11) series. In this period, Brätsch worked closely with the artist Adele Röder, with whom she founded DAS INSTITUT in 2007 as a platform for their artistic exchange. And as such, these paintings by “Kerstin Brätsch for DAS INSTITUT” are aimed at DAS INSTITUT as their primary addressee. Together the artists reflect the increasing dominance of digital technologies and their effect on the production of images in art—and therefore also on painting.

The paintings are reminiscent of corporate logos, and of technical motifs such as pipes, bundles of cables, or fluorescent tubes. In these works, Brätsch concentrates primarily on the depiction of patterns, color gradients, and light effects. However, these manifest not in terms of digital perfection but rather in their painterly “fallibility.” Instead of painting “like a machine,” as was Andy Warhol’s aim, Brätsch counters the immaculate nature of the digital with the sheer physicality of color and canvas—that is, with the materiality of painting.

Some of the paintings are based on digital designs by Röder; in others, Brätsch orients herself toward the copy-paste function frequently used in digital image composition. The appropriation of preexisting motifs—such as recourse to the Brätsch

Compressors ads—effectively serves the purpose of examining the qualities of painting rather than placing the artist herself (as an author) at the heart of her work.

0.3 | DAS INSTITUT (KERSTIN BRÄTSCH & ADELE RÖDER)

This room features two collaborative works by DAS INSTITUT (Kerstin Brätsch and Adele Röder): the slide projections “Apes and Shapes” (2008–13) and “Am Sonntag” (2016).

“Apes and Shapes” brings together four groups of motifs: digital, abstract compositions from Röder’s series “Starline – Necessary Couture;” photographs of digital camera ads; black-and-white photographs from a book of hairstyles from the 1980s with the faces of the artists superimposed; and portrait photographs of Brätsch and Röder. In that last, their faces have been blackened and covered with their hair to suggest beards; they resemble wildly hirsute prehistoric men whose apparent masculinity is being calibrated by the ruler at the edge of the photo.

“Am Sonntag” also contains portraits of Brätsch and Röder as photographed by the Berlin artist Kathrin Sonntag. They are posing in front of a black background with black makeup applied to their bodies and faces. The photographs taken in profile give the impression of wasp-like waists, pointed chins and noses, or particularly thin necks—an illusion that is dispelled as soon as the artists turn to the camera. Narrative moments emerge in and between the individual motifs. Even if “Am Sonntag” doesn’t directly refer to visual precursors, the pictures are reminiscent of baroque paintings, or Wilhelm Busch’s comic illustrations, or Franz Xaver Messerschmidt’s eighteenth-century studies of facial expressions. They toy with the idea of roleplay and the switching of identities.

Far from showing the artists in an idealized light, the slide projections reveal a comical, even grotesque side. They wittily deconstruct classical ideas of beauty and shift the focus toward the primitive and the disfigured. Thus both slide shows are ultimately a playful engagement with visual (self-)representation.

0.4 & 0.8 | BLOCKED RADIANTS (FOR IOANA)

Grotesque imagery appears also in Brätsch's painting, in particular those works in which she emphasizes the brushstroke as a motif in its own right. In art history, the brushstroke is considered a stylistic signature—it reflects one's unique, individual process of painting. But Brätsch deploys it as an abstract sign, which she can arbitrarily enlarge, duplicate, and allow to migrate through various media and formats.

In the "Interchangeable Mylars (3 parts)" (2011–ongoing)—an example of this group is on view in room 0.3—the brushstroke takes on an almost grotesque corporeality. The paintings consist of three painted Mylar films whose layers can be rearranged. We can catch glimpses of eyes, a ribcage, or vegetation as well as abstract patterns depending on the sequence of the films. The Mylars are presented in so-called "Murphy Beds." The aggressive light from the fluorescent tubes mounted in the beds veritably "afflicts" the paintings—they look as though they are being dissected or X-rayed.

The "Blocked Radiants (for Ioana)," painted on the occasion of the 2011 Venice Biennale—the same year as the nuclear catastrophe of Fukushima—also manifest these ideas. Framed by filigree lines and oversize brushstrokes that recall thickets or claws, the circles in the upper half of the paintings seem to radiate energy. Their halos are reminiscent of suns, or black holes—highly dense accumulations of matter that destroy everything in the immediate vicinity.

Brätsch speaks of her desire to express an "abstract anxiety" with these paintings, alluding to the imperatives of self-optimization and achievement, but also to ungraspable physical threats such as atomic radiation. Upon entering the room, the works are initially viewed through neon-yellow Plexiglas; in the adjacent room the pane is blue. These filters change the way we look at things. The paintings seem polluted, even toxic, as a result.

0.5 | TALISMANS AND WISHING WELLS

The preoccupation with the effects of light continues in a work by DAS INSTITUT that occupies the middle of the gallery. "Absolution Well" (2016) combines single-brushstroke glasses by Brätsch with Röder's neon lights, both displayed inside a transportation crate. The spectrally luminous "well," which, as its title suggests, promises forgiveness, is surrounded by large-format works on paper.

For her coin paintings in the "Stars and Stripes" series (all 2009), Brätsch affixed (predominantly American) change to the surface of large-format paper primed with blackboard paint and covered with changing clouds of paint. The coins introduce the question of the value and commodity-form of art via their face value and physical weight, which can actually cause the paper to sag. But the paintings also evoke rituals designed to bring good luck, that is to say, the traditional pagan custom of tossing coins into a well and making a wish. The coins tend to gradually detach from the surfaces and gather at the foot of the paintings, just like coins at the bottom of a wishing well. In this way, the paintings themselves become magical talismans with the power to bring good luck.

The "Unstable Talismanic Rendering _Pele's Curse" marblings were made in 2014 in collaboration with the master marbler Dirk Lange. This centuries-old technique involves the application of paint to the surface of a shallow size tray. The colors are manipulated using combs or wooden sticks, and then a sheet of paper is placed in the tray, to which the paint adheres; the paper is then pulled off and allowed to dry. In this instance, Brätsch's recourse to the skills of a craftsperson was not just related to Lange's technical expertise regarding the chemical reactions of the colors. There was also a practical, physical component, namely that it requires two pairs of hands to create such large marblings. The title of the marblings refers to Brätsch's interest in Hawaiian mythology. Pele is the goddess of volcanoes and fire. Surrounded by magma-like forms that stand out against the black, primordial ground, the goddess sits majestically at the center of the work, a grimacing figure in the process of becoming.

0.6 | GLASSES AND MARBLINGS

This room combines the “Unstable Talismanic Rendering” marblings (2014–ongoing) with glass works that Brätsch has been producing in collaboration with the stained-glass painter Urs Rickenbach since 2012. With these, for the first time, Brätsch opted to hand over the realization of her artworks to another person—or, rather, she uses Rickenbach’s hand as an extension of her own. For Brätsch, glass isn’t just a craft material; she recognizes a kinship in its materiality and transparency with the screens of the smartphone, PC, and tablet through which we communicate and swap digital data on a daily basis.

In some of her glass works, Brätsch—aided by Rickenbach—revisits motifs from earlier series of paintings, such as the brushstroke, and lends them a surprising corporeality. In others, she continues her own painterly practice using luster, enamel paint, or ceramic pigment on antique glass. She has gradually begun to incorporate imperfections or cracks caused by the fragility of the material. She fills these weak spots with glass shards or patches them with lead solder, integrating materials from Rickenbach’s archive, such as fragments from church window bordures or agate slices left over from Sigmar Polke’s church windows for the Grossmünster in Zurich. This gives rise to translucent skeletons, mouths, and hands—spectral bodies with a sensual materiality.

Obsidian is a naturally occurring volcanic glass and a forerunner of polished and processed glass. It is formed when molten lava cools rapidly. Very much in tune with the provenance of her materials and also echoing the names of the marblings, Brätsch’s titles for her antique glass works reference the Hawaiian goddess of volcanoes, Pele, as well as Pele’s adversary, Poli’ahu, the goddess of ice and snow-covered mountains.

0.7 | KAYA (KERSTIN BRÄTSCH & DEBO EILERS)

Both pieces here are prime examples of the kind of work produced by KAYA—a collaboration between Brätsch and the American sculptor Debo Eilers that began in 2010. The name KAYA is a reference to Kaya Serene, the daughter of one of Eilers's childhood friends. Serene releases a synthesizing energy between the two artists—partly through her participation in their joint actions, partly as an imaginary third person in their artistic exchange. This invocation of a “third body” allows Brätsch and Eilers to take a step back from their creative authority and open up their respective artistic practices. They collaboratively traverse the boundaries between painting and sculpture, fusing both genres into an altogether new, hybrid artistic approach.

A pink-and-white children's playhouse stands in the middle of the room, next to which hangs a larger-than-life-size coin sculpture. The first is adorned with so-called “Bodybags.” Covered with cuts, scars, and protrusions (not dissimilar to Frankenstein's monster), these objects are made from Brätsch's Mylar paintings, which have been slit open and filled with sculptural elements made by Eilers. The seeming playfulness of the child-size house slips into the realm of the uncanny, even the sinister, thanks to these “Bodybags” suspended from black leather straps and metal handles. Whereas Brätsch's earlier Mylar works came with their own “Murphy Beds,” the “Bodybags” even have their own house.

The large coin is a continuation of motifs from Brätsch's “Stars and Stripes” series. On the one hand it is an oversize capitalist icon, on the other, it is a larger-than-life-size talisman. The design of the coin came about as a collaboration with the Paris mint “Monnaie de Paris.” One side of the coin bears a portrait of Eilers masked by Brätsch's brushstrokes. A smaller version of the coin has become an independent currency of KAYA's cosmos, used in various performances and, as a leftover, it ended up in the “Bodybags.” Thus, many of the KAYA artifacts lead a double life: they are artworks in their own right, but also objects of ritualistic actions. The videos presented in the large media room on the lower level provide more detailed insight into KAYA's performances.

-1.1 | PSYCHIC SERIES AND PSYCHOTROPS

The large hall on the lower level of the museum combines several groups of works that foreground painting as a highly subjective and vitalist medium. A custom-made display system involving metal frames transforms the space. Large-format works on paper dominate the view: they direct the viewers' attention and ultimately also their movements. Depending upon changes in one's position, the works constantly recombine into new contexts and configurations.

The exhibition design takes up one of Brätsch's central topics: it literally invites us to change our point of view. This is also a basic premise behind the "Psychic" series. During her studies at Columbia University in New York, Brätsch began to question artistic identity as a stable concept. She visited numerous clairvoyants and used their readings as starting points for her auratic renderings of larger-than-life-size heads devoid of individual facial features. "I wanted the paintings to stare back," says the artist, who has also described these works as "energy forms" or "power heads." They possess an overwhelming corporeality, not least by virtue of their size.

It is impossible to escape this corporeality on this floor. Again and again, the exhibition architecture invites one to close in on the works—they virtually pressure you. Greatly abstracted head shapes with wide eyes surrounded by a dark, bubbling mass stare out from the "Unstable Talismanic Rendering_Psychotrops" marblings. They resemble CT scans of the brain.

A ceiling-high graphite drawing effectively charts the room. It is the spectral revenant of a glass work and a sgraffito on which Brätsch is currently working as part of an "art in architecture" project in Zurich.

-1.2 | VIDEOS AND PERFORMANCES

The large media room houses a collection of videos showing the performative aspects of Brätsch's oeuvre. They were made in conjunction with DAS INSTITUT (with Adele Röder), It's Our Pleasure to Serve You (with Allison Katz, Adele Röder, and

Georgia Sagri), Jane Jo, KAYA (with Debo Eilers), and UNITED BROTHERS (Ei and Tomoo Arakawa).

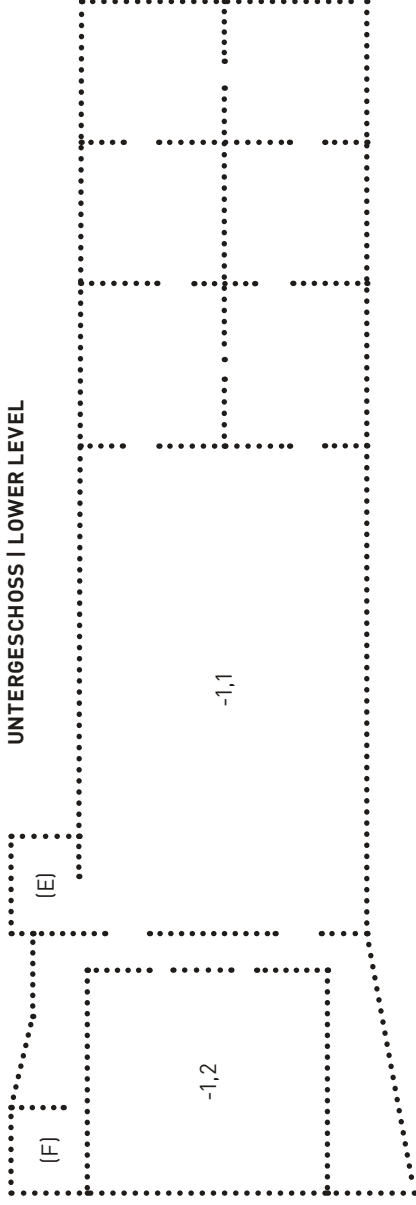
These videos reveal Brätsch's desire to subject her works to targeted stress tests. She drags them from the relative sanctity of the exhibition space into the public domain and exposes them to collisions with symbols and images in public space. These actions gave rise, among other things, to the parades and performances held in Japan and New York with UNITED BROTHERS, where Brätsch's Mylar paintings and glass "Sunshields" became artifacts for contemporary rituals.

KAYA also sprang from collective performances—in this case featuring Brätsch, Eilers, and the extended KAYA community. They treat their picture-objects like ritual artifacts that can either be displayed in exhibitions or used in performances, and be carried along on parades and processions. The various symbolic "burials" of their work (for example in Kassel or Munich) are particularly significant, inasmuch as they react, not without irony, to the proclaimed "death of painting."

The carpets, upon which the monitors have been placed and where visitors are allowed to walk, were made for one of the two performances projected onto the front wall: it shows a traditional Hawaiian hula dance realized by Ei Arakawa in conjunction with the Hālau Hula O Na Mele 'Āina O Hawai'i dance group at Serpentine Sackler Gallery in London in 2016 on the occasion of an exhibition by DAS INSTITUT.

A new work by Alexander Kluge, one of the cofounders of New German Cinema, is on view in the small media room. Kluge has made a number of films in the last two years titled "Fragmente für Das Institut" (Fragments for Das Institut) featuring Brätsch's glass panels and Röder's line drawings. They are presented here as two triptychs with alternating audio tracks. Kluge uses Brätsch's glass panels as a lens through which he films and tells stories, thereby taking up the idea of Das Institut as a platform that can be occupied and developed further by an ever-changing roster of different protagonists.

UNTERGESCHOSS | LOWER LEVEL



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|-----------|---|-----|---------------------------|
| 0.1 & 0.2 | Painting and (Digital) Technology | (A) | Entrance |
| 0.3 | DAS INSTITUT
(Kerstin Brätsch & Adele Röder) | (B) | Ticket Desk / Information |
| 0.4 & 0.8 | Blocked Radiants (for Ioana) | (C) | Book Shop |
| 0.5 | Talismans and Wishing Wells | (D) | Café |
| 0.6 | Glasses and Marblings | (E) | Lift |
| 0.7 | KAYA
(Kerstin Brätsch & Debo Eilers) | (F) | WC |
| -1.1 | Psychic Series and Psychotrops | (G) | Cloakroom |
| -1.2 | Videos and Performances | | |