

*Time Signified, Time Depicted: Veronika Kellndorfer's SCHOCKEN*

It's a cliché to say a photograph freezes an instant of time, that a camera captures a moment, and it's a commonplace to say that what is present in a photograph is defined by an absence. But the SCHOCKEN installations of Veronika Kellndorfer take the observer far below the surfaces of these commonplaces. Her installations seamlessly integrate complex layers of the past into the flow of the present; they give form to a time of lost innocence, they vividly portray the importance of modernism – an aesthetic that dominated twentieth century western art – and they make present the absence of an entire culture.

Kellndorfer's ongoing, long-term fascination with architecture has led to a manifold exploration into the fields of painting and photography that resulted in the often monumental glassworks she has produced since 1993. In them she transformed the very conceptual foundations of the medium photography – the aesthetic enclosure of space – by printing and burning the images into the two-dimensional and transparent surface of the glass.

In the SCHOCKEN installations this process of switching between three-dimensional spaces and two dimensional images appears almost reversed: research into the work of Erich Mendelsohn, the pre-eminent modernist architect of Weimar Germany, introduced Kellndorfer to photographs of a building that no longer existed, the Schocken department store Mendelsohn built in Stuttgart in 1926-28. How to intervene in architecture that no longer exists? The answer was to recreate the subject of the two dimensional photograph into three-dimensional space.

At the core of Kellndorfer's installations is the sign that dominated the building – SCHOCKEN – created in Paul Renner's imposing 1927 Futura typeface, based on the geometric shapes that became the representative visual elements of the Bauhaus design style. The letters form the verb 'to shock' as well as the name of the village and a man, Salman Schocken, whose grandfather took the name of the village as his own after the province was taken over by Prussia.

Salman Schocken was born in the province of Posen obliterated by Hitler and Stalin. He was one of the despised *Ostjuden* condescended to by the more

assimilated progressive German Jewish community. Short, squat and formally uneducated, he was fiercely ambitious, both for himself and for Jewish culture: his aim was to create the equivalent of a Jewish *Nibelungenlied*, a repository of myth distilled from Jewish writing to fire the contemporary imagination of German Jews. Hannah Arendt called him the Jewish Bismarck, but he was also the Jewish Lorenzo de Medici, a patron of the arts at the highest level.

He made the money to support his intellectual passions by developing the modern department store. Working with his brother Simon in his shop in Leipzig in 1911, he quickly responded to the desire of the working class to copy the colours and cuts of middle class clothing and to decorate their houses with similar objects: in other words, to emulate the fashion of middle class life, at a price a working class man or woman could afford. Schocken understood both economics and the use of technology. He built his business rapidly through the first war and by the war's end was overseeing a chain of stores, all run according to the most modern principles of scientific labour management, all using the latest technology and his modern business plans.

Schocken's Lorenzo de Medici inclinations were reified in his choice of Mendelsohn as the architect for his biggest stores – in Stuttgart and in Chemnitz – and in his collection of French painting, German and Hebrew incunabula, first editions and ancient coins. To support the work he felt would bring Jewish literature to the masses, he found a publishing company in 1931, transferred its operations to Palestine in 1934 and to the US in 1945. The company still exists today with its own imprint as part of the monolithic German Bertelsmann Company.

Kellndorfer began then, in May 2001, with the SCHOCKEN sign that originally dominated the Stuttgart store. She had replicas made of the letters, one quarter of the size of the original. Resurrecting them from the past by transporting them from the two-dimensional photographs of the department store into three-dimensional objects in the present, she used them to inhabit a space as part of an exercise of reconstruction. She thereby incorporated not only the architecture that inhabited the imagination of Weimar republic Germany, but also the name of the publisher responsible for introducing Kafka to America, a symbol of what was lost in the

Holocaust and the name of the library that holds the treasure of Jewish incunabula and art in Jerusalem.

Kellndorfer had the neon letters applied to the façade of Stuttgart's Hegel museum, the site of the philosopher's birthplace. The installation frames Hegel – Schocken was a devoted reader of the philosopher, a collector of first editions of his writings and the proud owner of a petition Hegel had written to the Nuremberg government when he was rector of the Gymnasium there – with the letters that symbolized the triumph of the modern department store before the war. The neon, an early modernist technology, belongs to the time when a Jewish pedlar from Posen could become assimilated into the culture of Hegel and Goethe, be at home in German commercial life, acquire enormous wealth and be a patron of the arts. The total destruction of this culture through war would be the first to be made visible to the world by other modernist technologies, film and photography, as it happened.

Kellndorfer's glowing letters cast their light (and their shadow) onto the building opposite the Hegel museum, a department store built by the Helmut Horten company in 1961. Schocken Inc. was aryanised after Kristallnacht. Forced to sell his stores to the Nazis who renamed them MERKUR (Mercury) for the God of merchants, Salman escaped the Holocaust moving first to Palestine and then the US. He recovered his property after the war only to sell out to Horten in 1951. Thus Kellndorfer's SCHOCKEN letters illuminated both the night sky of Stuttgart, the impermanence of boundaries and the unrelenting passage of time.

But not only did she reconstruct the letters, Kellndorfer also produced a model of the store itself and inside the museum devoted to the memory of Hegel reenacted its destruction. The explosion, recapturing the fate of the original, was filmed with four cameras. Replayed on four video monitors, the model's destruction was played back in different sequences so that every six minutes or so the sound of the explosion in one of the projections rhythmically punctuated the flow of extended time. Kellndorfer's installation replays the explosion over and over, bringing the model to life, then demolishing it again as in a Freudian repetition-compulsion that acts to numb the original trauma. The videos preserve forever the original erasure – the destruction of a building representing a culture obliterated by war and

ultimately swept away by the progress of the very consumer drive that gave it birth. And while in the videos matter moves irrevocably through time toward oblivion, laid out as photographs in a catalogue, the explosion is captured as sequence of a structure dismembered by the frames of the image. Only four months after the videos were made, the first plane would crash into the World Trade Center.

The third phase of the work fused modernist architecture with detonations of a different order. Seven miles away from this scene, in a totally different setting, Academy Castle Solitude, and almost as if to moderate the violence she had wreaked on her recreation of Mendelsohn's building, Kellndorfer showed photographs of the burgeoning magnolia buds in the profusion of spring juxtaposed with another modernist monument, the remaining buildings of the famous 1927 Weißenhofsiedlung. These buildings, part of the Deutsche Werkbund exhibition in Stuttgart that year, were beacons of German social and aesthetic progress after the first world war and were designed by the most important architects of the time including Gropius, Mies Van der Rohe and Le Corbusier.

In 2002, in her *SCHOCKEN part 2, some try to remember*, Kellndorfer transported the neon letters to the interior of another Mendelsohn building, the Metal Workers Union completed in Berlin 1930 (the union had moved its headquarters from Stuttgart two years earlier.) Here the letters no longer dominate and designate a whole building but are consigned to an inner space, framed alternately by the sinuous curves and strict verticals of a room. Their presence gives rise to a different conceptual activity. Isolated by the frame of a window seen in daylight or in the night from across the street lighting up the space the letters' incongruity make us confront what we usually ignore: the space that surrounds us.

In 2011, ten years after her first *SCHOCKEN* installation, Kellndorfer returned again to the subject with her *SCHOCKEN part 3, dedicated to Franz Kafka's Amerika*. In this iteration, the letters *SCHOCKEN* were enlarged – a third rather than a quarter the original – and the venue of the installation changed from Stuttgart and Berlin to Los Angeles. There, Kellndorfer brought the letters closer to the earth, nestling them atop a small wall against an earthen bank on the side of a swimming pool. The garden is on the grounds of what was actress Anne Baxter's house, built in

the 1930s and remodelled in 1952 by the noted California modernist John Lautner, a protégée of Frank Lloyd Wright and the American equivalent of Erich Mendelsohn. The house was remodelled again in 2010 by JohnstonMarkLee who invited Kellndorfer to use house or garden as an installation site.

Franz Kafka's unfinished novel *Amerika* was first published two years after the author's death in 1927, the same year Mendelsohn completed the Stuttgart store, Renner devised the Futura type face and the Weißenhofsiedlung exhibition opened. Schocken's editions of Kafka were the first to give his writing widespread distribution in Germany and his 1935 republication of *Amerika* made the author almost a household name. After the Nazi government banned Kafka's novels, Schocken published them through a publisher in Prague and when the Nazis closed down Schocken Verlag in 1939, Salman had already moved the operation to Palestine, publishing editions of Kafka in Hebrew. In 1945 he established Schocken Books in New York where he published the first American edition of *Amerika* and the other novels in 1946.

The garden setting of Kellndorfer's *SCHOCKEN part 3, dedicated to Franz Kafka's Amerika* lessens the SCHOCKEN sign's architectonic geometry and gives it an anthropomorphic quality. In one photograph its warm glow reflected in the pool below illuminates a social gathering contrasting with the distant lights of the anonymous city below. The installation is literally the word made, not flesh – but light: the illumination of the intellect that Salman Schocken hoped to create as a publisher.

It is a very short distance from these large, illuminated letters in a Los Angeles garden to the letters that overlook the hills not far away, HOLLYWOOD, spelling out the symbol for a place of fabricated dreams and imagined history. Like the Kafka story left incomplete, Kellndorfer's SCHOCKEN series offers us the chance to picture the complexities of historical time through a symbolic system that itself will continue to shift, change and resound.

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