

Music at the end of the century

Interview with Henning Wettendorf from Katalog, Denmark, Spring 2000

Text and images by Anja Teske

Representing a noisy activity with a silent image gives an absurd opposition. I have to admit, I do like that. It's impossible, really, but it also illustrates how impossible it is to want to convey anything and everything photographically. What the photograph shows is not vacuuming, but a frozen image of vacuuming. Peace at last! That's why we vacuum, after all

We want our surroundings to be pleasant, and the vacuum cleaner lets us reconquer a room. Cleanliness is ours; foreign bodies are banished. It's a welcome opportunity to work out our aggression, to cleanse ourselves, to calm down again.

If we find something unpleasant, or if we can't (or won't) live alongside it, we simply banish it without a trace. We rule over our personal space. The din of the vacuum cleaner gives vent to our aggression. The vacuum cleaner is our partner: together we take up arms against filth and chaos, eradicating the revulsion we would otherwise feel. Selecting a vacuum cleaner is an important choice, of course: we care who our partner is! Some vacuum cleaners even have names. Just yesterday, I was in a hygiene shop where all sorts of used vacuum cleaners were on sale. I saw a row of vacuum cleaners through the window of the bus, lined up like an army at the kerb. Of course, I got off at the next stop to investigate. Some of the models were very nice indeed. One, an ancient model in perfect working order, was marketed as a vacuum cleaner with tradition. Don't you think a vacuum cleaner gradually becomes part of our own personal history as the years go by? I do. After all, elderly people often don't want to give up vacuum cleaners which have been faithful companions for years.

"If the silence of the photograph is not a crucial aspect to your work, I wonder if you have installed the photographs with the actual noise present in the room?"

Actually, I've been thinking along those lines myself. I already have plans to include sound - not as the backdrop to a whole exhibition, but as a separate project - either in a corner by itself, not too loudly, or in an extremely light, adjacent room. I see it as an independent "image", "An Autonomous Composition", which the spectator can associate mentally with the others. I'm quite certain that I don't want to break the silence completely: spectators should be free to come and go in peace. The title could equally well be, "Aggression: A Composition". I think the images will be received differently in this context. The silence will become more noticeable.

I've planned further photographs to accompany those you've seen. I envisage a visual stroll through various living rooms, where people are hanging a picture over the sofa, or vacuuming. I want to take equivalent photos in office surroundings, or in locations similar to those where the original photographs were taken. I've thought about a video with a sound track, too. Almost everyone I've asked permission to photograph while vacuuming has agreed. Most of them feel quite at home, since it's a chore everyone has to do. The frame within which we vacuum is simultaneously private and public.

