

An Abgrund der Bilder

St. Matthäus Stiftung 23.04. – 03.09. 2023 Michael Müller

Mögliche und unmögliche Bilder #I [Possible and Impossible Images #I], 2022

"I think, in general, there is no picture that you can't paint," Gerhard Richter answered in 2001 to the question of whether it was possible to create paintings based on photographs of the industrial extermination of people in the Nazi concentration camps during the Holocaust. Perhaps there are personal limits, such as one's own (painterly) inability, but in principle everything is paintable and representable.

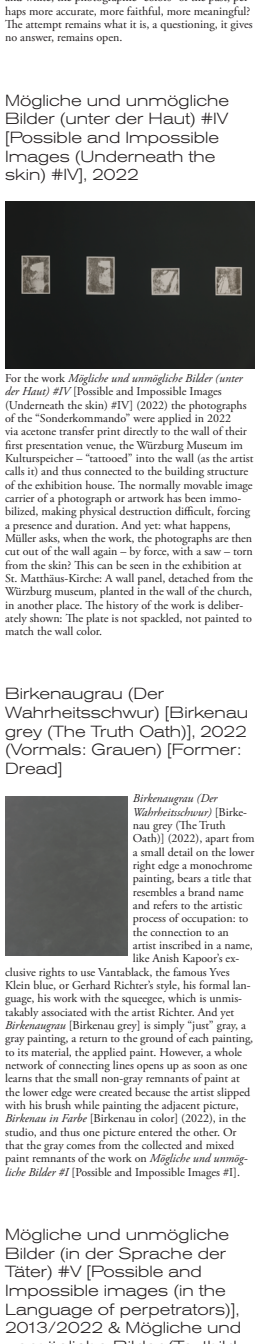
In 2014, Richter created his *Birkenau* cycle, consisting of four paintings, and additionally four digital reproductions of these paintings, printed on aluminum plates, which, each cut into four rectangles, are installed in the entrance area of the Reichstag building in Berlin. The paintings were based on the only four photographs that directly and immediately document the extermination of Jews in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Taken from a gas chamber by a prisoner of the so-called "Sonderkommando" at the risk of death and smuggled out of the camp, they show the burning of corpses and naked women in a forest on their way to the gas chamber of the death camp. Richter painted the four photographs photographically in oil on canvas.

Dissatisfied with the result, since in his view he had not succeeded in capturing and depicting the events and suffering of the Holocaust in their entirety in his paintings, he then worked them further with a squeegee and the colors black, gray, green, and red until abstract forms covered the entire canvases and the figurative depictions. "There are just photos that I could just make into bad pictures by painting them. And these four photos are so good that I can only leave them as they are. You can describe them or dedicate a music to them or, if it goes well, dedicate an abstract painting." Originally called *Vier abstrakte Bilder* [Four Abstract Paintings], he later changes the title to *Birkenau* in order to lay a trail to their origin and historical reference that is no longer discernible on the images themselves.

In his work *Mögliche und unmögliche Bilder #I* [Possible and Impossible Images #I], (2022), Michael Müller deconstructs Richter's *Birkenau* cycle. Without seeking a direct comparison between two painters (Richter vs. Müller), i.e., without pursuing Richter's thesis of individual painterly abilities and personal limits as a condition of the possibility of the paintability of every picture, Müller rather continues Richter's initial question of whether everything is in principle paintable or showable by using Richter's aesthetics to investigate what different works of art can achieve. In the fundamental freedom of art, grounded in its aesthetic essence, Müller derives ethical considerations of artistic ways of representation and processes that were left out by Richter, who confines himself only to the immanence of art: While art, Müller argues, can devote itself to anything and take on any subject, paint and show anything, but can it achieve anything? Is it possible to give an empathetic picture of the Holocaust? In the totality of its inhuman, absolute and total power of annihilation, in its urge to destroy even the last trace of its existence?

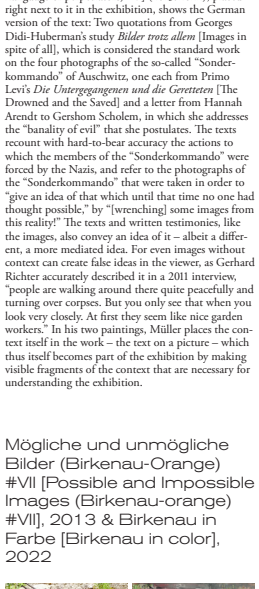
For his investigation, Müller uncovers the painting layers of Richter's *Birkenau* pictures and questions them according to their respective expressiveness: as the lower, later concealed layer, the painterly figurative reproductions of the four photographs of the annihilation process of the European Jews taken from the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp – supplemented by the wiping technique typical of Richter, which veils what is depicted and yet allows it to be recognized. The second level is formed by the abstract overpaintings, the streaks and stripes drawn with a squeegee – a technique that allows chance into the painting process and is actually considered unreproducible. Müller, who nevertheless succeeds in reproducing it, shows that even the supposed randomness and arbitrariness are the results of artistic decisions that are reproducible, like the digital prints on aluminum in the Reichstag building, on which Müller has chosen to base his painting in the exhibition, which is also divided into four panels. Installed side by side on the walls of the exhibition space, surrounding the visitors, it is up to them to decide what can be painted and shown at all – what each of the works on view shows in an individual way. Even if Gerhard Richter may have considered his first artistic attempt at a response – the realistic paintings with the photographs of the "Sonderkommando" – to have failed and sought a renewed, more 'precise', 'better' or 'more appropriate' response in the abstract overpaintings, the first attempt is nevertheless also a response in spite of everything. By juxtaposing the various attempts at answers in the exhibition space and allowing them to coexist – may they have failed or not – Müller opens up a space of openness that unfolds in the dialogue of the diverse, always incomplete and never final answers.

For everything is paintable and showable, but there is no image that universally and completely shows the world; rather, every image takes a position and must relate to the world, to what it shows. Even the documentary image, the photographs from the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, for all the authenticity of the place and events they show, their indisputable testimony, are not complete, but excerpted, selective, perspectival – and it is precisely through this that they gain their necessity, significance and dignity. The blind spots that can be seen on them and the absent that can be guessed at, which is just not shown, distinguishes their humanity and uniqueness.



Small captions for the artworks in the grid, including Richter's Birkenau cycle and Müller's deconstructions.

Mögliche und unmögliche Bilder im Fluchtpunkt #III [Possible and Impossible Images in Vanishing Point #III], 2013



Small captions for the artworks in the grid, including Richter's Birkenau cycle and Müller's deconstructions.

Mögliche und unmögliche Bilder (unter der Haut) #IV [Possible and Impossible Images (Underneath the skin) #IV], 2022



Small captions for the artworks in the grid, including Richter's Birkenau cycle and Müller's deconstructions.

Mögliche und unmögliche Bilder (in der Sprache der Täter) #V [Possible and Impossible images (in the Language of perpetrators)], 2013/2022 & Mögliche und unmögliche Bilder (Textbild in Hebräisch) #VI [Possible and Impossible Images (Text image in Hebrew) #VI], 2013/2022



Small captions for the artworks in the grid, including Richter's Birkenau cycle and Müller's deconstructions.

Mögliche und unmögliche Bilder (Birkenau-Orange) #VII [Possible and Impossible Images (Birkenau-orange) #VII], 2013 & Birkenau in Farbe [Birkenau in color], 2022



Small captions for the artworks in the grid, including Richter's Birkenau cycle and Müller's deconstructions.

Kopfflose (nach Otto Freundlich), aus der Serie Heilungen, 2022 & Vergleichen, 2022

[Headless (after Otto Freundlich), from the series Healings, 2022 & Compare, 2022]

Small captions for the artworks in the grid, including Richter's Birkenau cycle and Müller's deconstructions.

Figuren zur Befragung empathischer Reaktionen [Figures for questioning empathic reactions], 2022

Small captions for the artworks in the grid, including Richter's Birkenau cycle and Müller's deconstructions.

Michael Müller

In his work, the German-British artist Michael Müller (*1970) explores the aesthetics and visualisation of complex thought processes, which he constantly questions in terms of their sensual experience and material content. Starting from historical narratives, scientific methods, social norms as well as linguistic and numerical systems, he develops an artistic practice that constantly takes these systems and structures to their limits through variation, transformation, manipulation and fictionalising modification. The resulting doubts and irritations, as well as the resulting doubt about the existing and mistrust of unquestioned truths, create a completely independent artistic language of form that manifests itself not only in large-format paintings and drawings but also in sculptures, installations, performances and Müller's curatorial practice.

Michael Müller lives and works in Berlin. From 2015 to 2018, he taught as a professor at the Berlin University of the Arts (UdK).

Michael Müller's works have most recently been shown in solo exhibitions at the Städel Museum Frankfurt (*Der geschenkte Tag*, *Kastor & Polydeukes* [The Given Day, *Kastor & Polydeuces*], 2022–2023), the Museum im Kulturspeicher Würzburg (*Mögliche und unmögliche Bilder* [Possible and Impossible Images], 2022–2023), Galerie du Monde Hong Kong (*Drei biographische Versuche* [Three Biographical Attempts], 2021–2022), and Hasenheide 13, Sammlung Wemhöner (*Schwierige Bilder* [Difficult Pictures], 2021), among others.

Photo: © Frank Steinhilber (Installation view), Courtesy Städt. Museum Würzburg, © Michael Müller, Michael Steinhilber (Frankfurt)