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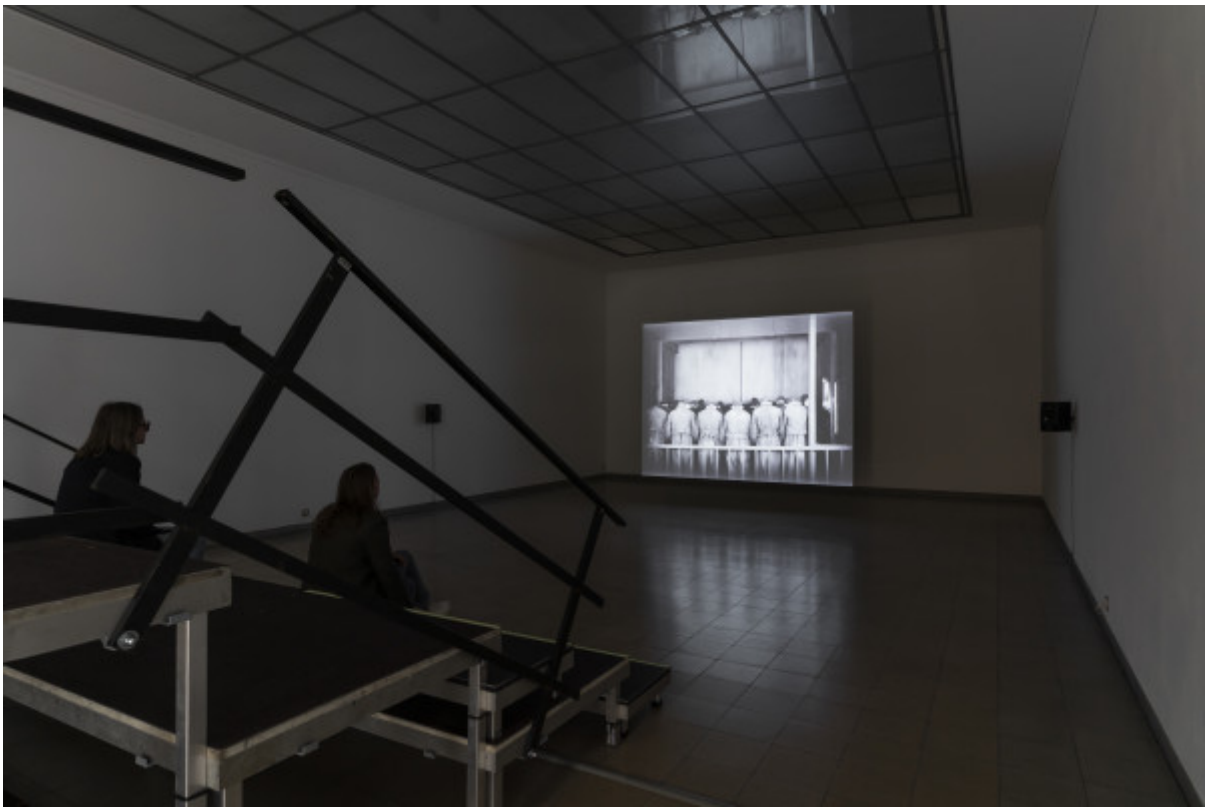
Montaging, Archiving, Revealing

Silvia Kolbowski at Kunsthaus Glarus

Lara Holenweger

Kunsthaus Glarus is showing two videos by Silvia Kolbowski—*Who will save us?* (2022) and *Missing Asher* (2019)—in two of its galleries. Both look from different perspectives at the development of dysfunctional dynamics in capitalist and neoliberal social systems.





Silvia Kolbowski, *Who will save us?*, 2022. Silvia Kolbowski, *Who will save us?* Installation view, Kunsthaus Glarus, 2022. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Gunnar Meier

Who will save us? was created for the exhibition of the same name. In the video montage, Kolbowski juxtaposes two dystopian science fiction films from different decades: the silent *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang (1927) and *THX 1138* by George Lucas (1971). A stand in the middle of the gallery invites viewers to sit down. The video is projected onto a large screen and runs in a loop.

At the beginning everything is going «the way it should»: while the ruling class up in the tower of the «Club of Sons» savors knowledge and culture and their «head» leans back in his chair, workers below ground trudge in uniform masses on the way to their shift. The images from *Metropolis* alternate with clips from *THX 1138* showing flashing displays and people in white coats operating digital communication and surveillance technologies, much like the workers in Metropolis operate mechanical machines. As the two historical films and their depictions of technology are contrasted, the shift from industrialization to digitization, from a clearly structured two-class society to individualistic tendencies in late capitalism, becomes palpable. The latter are particularly evident in a scene from *THX 1138* where the main character, locked in a white room, demands more medication to alleviate his mental suffering. Kolbowski highlights the break in her montage, but there also is a continuity in the way the two films overlap. In both, the suffering caused by the particular social and economic system is repressed, just by different means. In *THX 1138*, the psyche is stabilized with drugs, while in *Metropolis* the workers do not turn against the elite when a machine explodes, and the city is flooded. Instead of rebelling against the oppressive conditions, the workers follow the lurid speech of a prominent figure and blame the witch for the destruction.

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Silvia Kolbowski, *Who will save us?*, 2022, Film still. Courtesy the artist.

In the late Middle Ages, the burning of witches played a central role in the development of a capitalist, patriarchal social order and served primarily as an instrument for suppressing

resistance, as Silvia Federici has shown.[1] In Kolbowski's work the witch appears as the object of projection of a dysfunctional society that remains rooted in structures of denial. The polarization of elite and precariat—with each blaming the other for the suffering—is echoed in the unequal power relations in the contemporary global context. It points to misogynistic, racist, and classist politics, to populist rhetorics of demarcation propagated by some holders of power and embraced even by many of those who are most affected by the current crisis. Instead of drawing on the past to imagine a better future, Kolbowski shows the repercussions of history in the present through her montage of historical films in *Who will save us?*. Seated on the stand built for the screening, the viewers—the public—are ultimately encouraged to become aware of their role.



Silvia Kolbowski, *Missing Asher*, 2019. Silvia Kolbowski, *Who will save us?*, Installation view, Kunsthaus Glarus, 2022. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Gunnar Meier

Kolbowski similarly weaves different sources into one work in Missing Asher. The video is a follow-up to her multi-part project, *Enlarged from the Catalogue: Michael Asher Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979 (The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1983)*. We hear Kolbowski's voice off-screen, as she reads the title and then one of her letters to Michael Asher. In addition to her correspondence with the artist, Kolbowski also draws on memories and newspaper articles to tell the story of her work, which is based on an Asher project. *Enlarged from the Catalogue: Michael Asher …* was created in 1990 for a group show at the S. Bitter-Larkin Gallery in SoHo. Kolbowski's work was sold twice while the exhibition was still running. *Missing Asher* documents the genesis and life story of the project since the sale and, in the process, reveals value creation processes in the neoliberal art market.



Silvia Kolbowski, *Missing Asher*, 2019, Film still. Courtesy the artist.

The visual language oscillates between presentation and documentation. Kolbowski overlays quotes, which she sometimes reads aloud integrates photographs related to her and Asher's

work, and uses monochrome color fields to structure the narrative. Particularly striking are sequences that show Kolbowski's hands as they place a leaflet on a table, carefully unfold it and then fold it again or arrange and stack various other documents and keep placing transparent paper in between. The leaflet is part of *Enlarged from the Catalogue: Michael Asher* …. The careful act of (self-)archiving stands in stark contrast to the fate of the work itself, which Kolbowski finds damaged and incomplete in a gallerist's warehouse at the end of her research. On the other hand, her reconstruction of the history of her project and her correspondence with Asher reveal an aesthetic and intellectual appreciation for conceptual and discursive work that is lacking in the capitalist art market. Kolbowski refers to this lack in an account of a discussion she had with the gallerist during preparations for her exhibition at S. Bitter-Larkin Gallery. When it is announced that her contribution will not be very commercial, the gallerist responds by saying, «What is she talking about?» In the video, Kolbowski repeats this sentence insistently and, in doing so, showcases not only the lack of understanding of artistic work that does not fall within the scope of conventional studio production. What also resonates through the gallerist's words is the profit-motivated conviction that, with the right strategies, almost anything can be sold. What is lost in the question is the significance of the work itself. This is what Kolbowski brings into focus in Missing Asher. The video work not only reveals the production and circulation conditions of artistic work in the art market, but also negotiates the adaptation and continuation of works of her own (and of other artists) as an opportunity to put alternative value creation processes in motion. With a focus on process, research, and self-referentiality, Kolbowski situates herself within the history of conceptual art, which is brought up to date in *Missing Asher*.

In both videos, Kolbowski employs montage as a method and, by contrasting and staging different sources, directs attention away from the stories being told to overarching contexts of meaning. In *Who will save us?* Kolbowski allegorically montages two films from different periods to shed light on political, social, and economic conditions today, whereas in *Missing Asher* she proceeds in a matter-of-fact documentary manner, using different materials to tell the object biography of her work and thus highlighting contemporary structures in the art market. While *Who will save us?* opens up a view of a broad socio-political context, *Missing Asher* sticks to the self-referentiality of the art system and the rules of conceptual art. Both video pieces require time. Even upon extended reflection, they keep their distance in the Brechtian mode, raising a series of questions: Where do we stand today? What are capitalist and neoliberal social systems doing to us and to works of art? How do we situate ourselves within these structures? In their formal incisiveness, between affect and reflection, the works prompt us to take a stand.

[1] See Silvia Federici, *Caliban und die Hexe. Frauen, der Körper und die ursprüngliche Akkumulation* (Vienna 2012), pp. 203–209.

LARA HOLENWEGER

Lara Holenweger ist Kunsthistorikerin und Autorin. Sie lebt und arbeitet in Zürich.