

Philipp Goldbach – Blackboards and Micrographs

Philipp Goldbach's works are situated in the border zone between pictorial imagery and the written word. The continuous process of writing is as much a focus of his observation as the pictorial character of writing that emerges simultaneously.

In his photographic series of *Blackboards*, he investigates the act of writing and its disappearance as both a process and an attempt to acquire and convey knowledge. By virtue of its specific location, each of the empty blackboards reflects its own intellectual history and a principle of traditional knowledge that contains components which appear almost historical today.

The lecture halls of German universities are presented as specific settings that bear the imprint of such intellectual giants as Theodor W. Adorno, Ernst Bloch, Carl Friedrich Gauß, Martin Heidegger, Heinrich Hertz and Carl Schmitt. Yet these figures are absent, and not even their teachings are present on the blackboards. The subjects of these photographs are the settings in which they taught, each of which has a history of its own. The palpable history of a given location is revealed in its used and often worn furnishings – although intellectual history associated with it is indicated only by the reference to the historical setting.

The *Blackboards* originated as part of a series of photographs taken in the Philosophy Department at the University of Cologne (2002/2003). The images document the condition of the blackboards in the seminar rooms. Philipp Goldbach selected blackboards that appear blank at first glance. Only upon closer examination does the 'erased' history appear in the form of fragments of knowledge that seem to refer in a kind of coded form to the meaning that lies behind them. The surface of the blackboard captured in the photograph appears as a fleeting image of a continuously unfolding process.

The actual blackboards, however, refer through their location and its implied reference to the 'body of thought' constructed by the scholars who once worked there to a self-contained process. A history of scholarship is evoked by the images of the blackboards. Yet it also becomes evident that this history extends into the present and can only be related in fragments. The different scholarly approaches, regardless of whether they pertain to philosophical issues or to the natural and social sciences, can all be viewed as attempts to describe the world, at least in part.

The distinctive aspects of these individual attempts become evident in the diverse images of the blackboards. Figures such as Bloch (Tübingen) and Adorno (Frankfurt) appear in our mind's eye alongside such historically somewhat problematic figures as Heidegger (Freiburg) and Schmitt

(Greifswald). The different manifestations of intellectual history are evident less in the photographed blackboards themselves than in the imagined settings at the universities cited in the photographs and the professors associated with them. Goldbach's photographs are neutral in this respect.

An essential characteristic of the *Blackboards* is that they confront the viewer without conveying the expected content. The blackboard remains blank, regardless of whether viewers see themselves as the producers or the recipients of the imagined chalk notations. Only isolated fragments of writing are visible, like ruins of a civilization to be studied by archaeologists. The place of writing is posited as a setting in which knowledge is revealed – or originates – through its expression in words (or figures). This setting is also a transient one, as every new insight is superimposed over its predecessor and erases it. The apparently empty blackboard is a vessel for all kinds of knowledge; the condition of emptiness is like a pause in the constant striving to describe the world.

Philipp Goldbach uses two different formats for his *Blackboards*. The 80 x 64 cm format enables him to display several different blackboards in a series of portraits. The large formats (125 x 156 cm) aim for a panorama effect that completely absorbs the viewer's attention. The flat view of the blackboards and their presentation of the writing surface as a pictorial plane make the viewer's gaze leap back and forth between the almost painterly panels covered with traces of chalk and the wood and metal constructions that enclose them, which create the space required for the respective blackboard systems to function. The usually antiquated-looking technology offers a point of reference for the experience of the practical and technical history of universities which stands in a certain sense in contrast to the aspect of intellectual history that is described. As the central focal point of the lecture hall and a medium for the transfer of knowledge, the blackboard appears destined to become history itself in the university context. To an increasing extent, the chalkboard has given way to more modern forms of technology used for purposes of communication and explanation. In that sense, Goldbach's *Blackboards* are undeniably portraits of an era that is nearing its end, at least as far as technology is concerned.

Goldbach's *Micrographs* also speak of different approaches to the description of our world. They focus on writing as the medium of language. Philipp Goldbach uses travel accounts from the 19th and early 20th centuries as well as four essential texts representing the German philosophy of Idealism and copies them in tiny letters in pencil. In contrast to the *Blackboards*, he reproduces the literal content, but selects two different formats for this purpose as well. The smaller works (130 x 100 cm) compress the writing to a size that is just barely legible but can be viewed in their

entirety without difficulty. This is the format he uses for the philosophical texts. The more compact size emphasizes the totality of the philosophical structure of ideas, the concept of a complete description of the world of the mind (or of a certain part of it) with the aid of a philosophical system.

The expedition documents, such as the *Last Journals* of polar explorer Robert Falcon Scott, are displayed in a 192 x 150 cm format. These roughly human dimensions facilitate or perhaps even require a more fragmentary mode of reading. The somewhat larger letters bind the viewer's gaze to specific points and demand a more intuitive reading involving leaps and bounds. The viewer undertakes an expedition of his own through the unfamiliar world of the text. This physical experience of the reader is juxtaposed with the physical experience of the writer. In his diary entries, Robert Scott provides a fascinating account of his last, failed mission to the South Pole. Plagued by one setback after another, the expedition appeared doomed from the outset. Yet Scott forced himself to record his experiences for posterity in meticulous detail until the very end and his death on the ice.

The more descriptive expedition texts (which include, in addition to Scott's diaries, the diaries of Michel Leiris, who served as secretary on an ethnological expedition through Africa [1931-1933] and Alexander von Humboldt's account of his travels through South America [1799-1804]), leave a strong visual impression in the reader's mind. These accounts from foreign lands evoke numerous images and ideas – especially when read in fragments. In contrast, the philosophical treatises are abstract and comprehensible only within the framework of the concept as a whole, as they attempt to express what was previously inconceivable in verbal images.

Philipp Goldbach also uses different forms of expression for different types of texts, demonstrating the formal aspects of language are as significant as its content. His *Micrographs* are not only texts in the sense of messages expressed in language but also pictures in the traditional sense. Covered with patterns composed of traces of writing, the surfaces of his paper strips are grey-shimmering expanses full of spatial energy and motion.

These graphite surfaces are created through months of work. Characters are set side by side on special tables. Thus a living image, whose dimensions are calculated at the outset, emerges from the continuous writing process. Proceeding from the length of a given text, Goldbach calculates the size of his characters accordingly. The individual letters are deliberately set in such a way that the last word of the original text also marks the end of the completed picture. The title of each work names the actual author, as in *The Critique of Pure Reason (I. Kant)*. The original is preserved and receives no written commentary. Only the image created from it gives it a new meaning that has never been associated with it before.

Both of Goldbach's pictorial forms, *Blackboards* and *Micrographs*, seek to explore different approaches to description of the 'world' in its real sense. Both the scholarly approach to the description of our world (as an attempt to convey its meaning within the context of the university) and the direct approach through language in the travel accounts are based on the premise of defining the world in which we live.

With his investigation through the medium of art, Goldbach expands the traditional approach in both cases by adding an additional level of reflection. His *Micrographs* present the philosophical treatise as a comprehensive image that obeys the internal logic of a coherent body of thought. Yet they also appear as self-enclosed images which seem more like islands than seas of knowledge by virtue of the density of their language and the degree of abstraction they involve. The travel accounts are oceans in comparison. The viewer can float on their surfaces, reading images from the texts and wandering through the body-sized formats like an explorer.

In contrast, the *Blackboards* dispense almost entirely with text, relying on its absence and the related projection from memory and ideas about what might have been expressed there in words.

Visual images and language compete with one another, yet both are means of acquiring knowledge and incorporating it into tradition. In his works, Philipp Goldbach embarks on a search for traces. What is absent points to what was. The historical corresponds to the present. Yet Goldbach's personal appropriation of this subject introduces another level to the mix. It liberates the examined history from its sovereignty of meaning and expands the various accounts from European intellectual history to form an open-ended mosaic of an experimental artistic investigation of knowledge.

Volker Rattemeyer, November 2009