

Improbable traces

Inventaire Ethnique

Stephen Sack's newest contribution to the world archive of images centers around an apocalyptic vision of natural history. Previously he exploited the dead, now he turns his attention to the destruction of the animal world to further his career. These strange traces of animals that appear to be a mixture of real and imagined species show the artist's willingness to subvert our reality. I particularly object to Sack's depiction of ape like animals that seem so close to being human. This makes me uncomfortable and seems to undermine the great advances in philosophy and technology that we have witnessed in this century. Still Sack persists in his so called visual philosophy. Confronting us with the systematic destruction of our environment, he includes not only the animal world, but as Buffon's improbable successor, man is also included in this horrible scenario. Why is the artist so pessimistic? Has he no faith in mankind's capacity to correct the imbalances in his inevitable quest towards perfection? How he torments us with his criticism and ecological rhetoric in regards to our progress! There is no place for the elephant in this world and only the nostalgic dreamers can pretend otherwise. These unproductive images propose no solutions to the establishment of a new equilibrium necessary to sustain a legitimate growth in wealth and at the same time minimize the ecological consequences.

Obviously Sack ignores the fact that today no one wants an artist to address political questions. Time has proven that art cannot change the flow of history. The artist's implication is that conceptual art is dead and that real ideas must be introduced into the domain of art. This is not only an insult to one of the basic assumptions of contemporary art but a direct affront to the art market on which so many of us depend. Antagonistic art is not marketable in the short term and I think that we all agree that the outdated notion of an artist working for posterity is basically opposed to the very act of presenting his work while still alive. Do we need this? On another level, we could address the question of this allegorical Buffon work and the mechanical reproduction that is so fundamental to today's society. I can understand reproductions of Buffon's outdated work from a nostalgic point of view but how can one justify a reproduction of a back of an engraving that was never intended to be seen? As a matter of fact this appears to be a central feature of Sack's work. Sack is intent on photographing totally useless and destroyed objects and he seems to be the only one who sees their significance. But let's attack the problem from another aspect.

Why is Sack's work so out of date? Without going into an explanation of the current tendencies in the art world let me simply state that Sack's work exists out of time. This is a well documented fact. His images have no temporal references or reveal dimension. He is creating outside the mainstream of art. We find ourselves free to re-invent the world.

Perhaps we could gain some understanding into Sack's mind if we explore the philosophical theory of Buffon's work in relation to Sack. Buffon lived in that time where the academy's intention was to abandon the outdated and archaic methods of the alchemists in favor of a modern concept of scientific research. This is obviously not Sack's intention, for although it could be argued that Buffon had barely ever left his beloved France to do his

own research, he still had the intention to be modern. Sack, on the other hand, is stubbornly alchemistic. He has admitted to me that he receives his ideas as a revelation and then, and against all scientific method, goes about proving his ideas by discarding all evidence to the contrary. And so he has dishonestly gone about proving his visual philosophy by concentrating on unique details and then suppressing 99% of our existing world!

Then again it is perhaps I who has not been honest. Criticism is so easy.

It is much more difficult to write positively, which of course does not explain the recent death of art criticism. Another voice would be perhaps convey some other aspects of the work.

When I first saw this work I was amazed just how little there was to see..

Slowly I began to perceive these fine traces of faces and animals and I could not help myself but to reminisce on fond childhood memories. Through all the different parts of his Noffub work, of which one is shown here, it is really amazing that Sack can communicate so many ideas through the exploitation of an unique observation.

In this series of faces belonging to various ethnic groups, this late 19th century German edition of Buffon was published after Darwin's work had been widely read, and already the influence of Social Darwinism could be felt. The faces are arranged in an order that suggests a hierarchy of superiority starting with European and descending down through Arab, Kamschadale, northwest American, Chinese etc.. The photos of these faces are traces left by time on the backs of the engravings. We are left with an impression of loss and eclipse of the races as if they have become vague memories of things passed. But like ideas long ago discredited, remnants continue to influence our perception of reality. So the remains of racism and superiority are mixed with an almost nostalgic regret of the destruction of the non-European cultures, just as the entire series suggests that man on a whole risks becoming a memory.

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