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the failure of the surface

[michael müller at galerie thomas schulte]

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To put Michael Müller's work into words feels almost insulting. In his first solo exhibition with Galerie Thomas Schulte, Müller presents six works, taking cues from late 20th century post-structural linguistics. While the theory itself is certainly not for the faint of heart (everything means nothing... right), Müller translates his conceptual positioning with such approachable alacrity that it becomes apparent, even to a wholly naïve viewer.

As the exhibition's title, "Das Scheitern der Oberfläche" (The Failure of the Surface) suggests, Müller's surfaces fail: tile refuses to hold paint, radios and speakers play in such chaos that nothing is decipherable, and seemingly organised indices become inexorably jumbled. Confusion turns to intrigue, which turns to investigation that only leads to further confusion.: The viewer's mind, so necessarily linguistically structured, becomes lost in this dissolution of continuity.

The exhibition's central work, *Index der Willkür*, 2010/2011, which spans the majority of the gallery's walls like an oversized periodic table, traces an intellectual history of linguistic and social theoretical positions. Texts and portraits are coupled to create a semblance of continuity. Yet upon closer investigation, this relationship quickly reveals itself to be contrary: portraits are obscured, mismatched or missing altogether. The text itself, though chronologically ordered, follows no teleological path, speaking to the irreducibility of language and the futility of an attempt to place it within any systematic orientation.

In a side room, *Confusio Linguarum*, 2011, a towering assemblage of multicoloured speakers playing passages of Genesis, stands as if a modern-day tower of Babylon. Each speaker recites in a different language, blurring the words into a sonorous hum rather than intelligible sentences. By enacting linguistic deconstruction on what is arguably the past millennium's founding doctrine and most widely known tale, Müller's critique moves from a mere questioning of meaning to suggest a necessary distrust of words altogether. If by bringing back together the world's languages, all significance is lost, what does that suggest about each individual tongue? A tree is a tree, you might say, but it's also a *Baum*, an *árbol*, *depešo*. In the infinitely different connotations of those variants alone, one might begin to understand the issue at hand.

Müller is rather symptomatic of what appears to be a re-emergence of intellectually based art, especially in Berlin. It makes sense. When money is sparse and society is in tumult, thought replaces balloon animals. Let's hope at least the latter continues.

by Alexander Forbes

[Image: *Weltempfänger: Ich-Oper (Version: ELPROM, Typ M14-C)*, 2010/11, Mixed Media, Music: Thom Willems, voice: Kate Strong, 63 x 22,5 x 31 cm, 005256-gts, Courtesy Galerie Thomas Schulte]

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