

What pictures look like. (Book Review)

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Uta Barth

by Pamela M. Lee, Matthew Higgs and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe

Contemporary Artists Series

London: Phaidon, 2004/160 pp./\$39.95 (sb)

As a new addition to their "Contemporary Artists Series," Phaidon has published Uta Barth, one of the very few comprehensive monographs available on the artist. Including such titles as Gillian Wearing, Roni Horn, Dan Graham, Cai Guo Qiang and Hans Haacke, this series is positioned by the English publisher as a helpful, informative and relatively inexpensive tool for a broad audience interested in the various aspects of contemporary creation in the visual arts.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

This monograph is structured in the same way as Phaidon's preceding one on Haacke. It includes several critical analyses of the artist's work, two interviews (one of which was commissioned for the book), some of the artist's statements and writings, a biography and a bibliography. Careful and aesthetic design, fine color reproductions on high quality paper and soft covers are the key physical features of the whole series. However, it is the quality of the content that identifies this monograph best.

Uta Barth starts with Matthew Higgs' interview with the artist, establishing biographical grounding as well as artistic background for the rest of the book. Barth asserts, "a certain kind of detachment runs through my thinking and my work. I am interested in the margins, in everything that is peripheral rather than central." After earning an undergraduate degree in painting and photography at University of California Davis, Barth selected the MFA program in photography at University of California Los Angeles. "I was much more interested in Minimalism, Structuralism, and early Conceptual work." Since 1990 she has been teaching in the Art Department at University of California Riverside.

One cannot look at these numerous minimalistic, deliberately out of focus color photographs and not think of Gerhard Richter's paintings. Although denying a strong commonality of purpose, Barth concedes, "Richter and I are both making pictures of and about other pictures." Since her graduate years, Barth has exhibited at many galleries and museums around the world including the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Guggenheim in New York City and the Tate Modern in London. In 2004 she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. She is scheduled to participate in a group show at the Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art entitled "Out There: Landscape in the New Millennium" (May 20-August 28, 2005).

As with abstract expressionism or some conceptual art pieces, from a viewer's perspective many of Barth's pieces offer form, but do not easily open themselves to share their content. In an interview with Sheryl Conkelton, Barth explains her work's intention:

I have never been interested in making a photograph that describes what the world I live in looks like, but I am interested in what pictures (of the world) look like. I am interested in the conventions of picture making, in the desire to picture the world and in our relationship, our continual love for and fascination with pictures.

At this point the usefulness of Phaidon's enterprise is all the more welcome. Uta Barth--in the same way as Vito Acconci, Richard Prince, Christian Boltanski, William Kentridge or any of the 46 titles that the series now comprises--is meant to be, in the publishers' own words, "an authoritative study." Beyond the pleasure of seeing a broad variety of Barth's works reproduced in the pages of this monograph, the reader will find content not just from various experts and critics, but from Barth herself. When all is said, it is an informative study that is very likely to satisfy its audience.

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