

Florian Slotawa

P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER

Since 1996, German artist Florian Slotawa has created “*Besitzarbeiten*” (Property Works), a series of sculptural installations comprising various functional objects removed from his Berlin apartment and meticulously arranged in a gallery setting. The newest, *Besitzarbeit XII*, 2009, is the sole artwork in this exhibition, Slotawa’s first solo outing in New York. Created at a rate of about one per year, the “*Besitzarbeiten*” can be seen as a baseline, or control group, for his artistic practice, in which the primary gestures—designation, reorganization, juxtaposition, contextualization—are immaterial and the resultant artworks are increasingly diverse. In this sense, introducing New York audiences to Slotawa’s work with a sculpture from this series seems reasonable. The result, though, is also fairly insipid. Given the artist’s ability to respond inventively to specific exhibition sites—demonstrated last year at Arthouse in Austin, Texas, where Slotawa’s architectural intervention cannily revealed the building’s previous uses—it is unfortunate that the show, in one of the city’s most architecturally unique artistic venues, doesn’t take greater advantage of its setting.

Instead, the arrangement of objects stacked near one end of a long, narrow gallery determinedly mimics the compositional motifs of Piet Mondrian’s “Pier and Ocean” paintings, created in 1914 and 1915. The “artist’s household inventory,” as the wall label describes it, is here formed into a sturdy tower of domestic items including a roll of carpet, a steel shelving unit, a Bosch WFF 1401 washing machine, a kitchen sink, an armchair, a door with a dead bolt, and a wood dining table, among other objects. These materials, unaltered save for their extraction from the residential setting they normally inhabit, are balanced in a compact arrangement whose solids and voids do indeed

recall the array of horizontal and vertical marks in the Mondrian paintings. (This fact is confirmed by the letter-size printouts of images of five such canvases taped to the wall in an adjacent room.) It is marginally more rewarding, however, to consider the conceptual, rather than the formal, precedents for *Besitzarbeit XII*.

Foremost among this work’s progenitors are Marcel Duchamp’s readymades and Robert Smithson’s “non-site” sculptures. Slotawa’s consumer goods and household accoutrements are returned to his apartment after each exhibition, highlighting the artist’s power of arbitrary designation-as-art first employed by Duchamp nearly a century ago; the washing machine, for example, oscillates between receptacle for dirty clothes and artwork at the artist’s whim. Likewise, the presence of these objects in the gallery implies a partially emptied apartment in Berlin. Whereas Smithson effaced the distinction between “natural” and built environments with his importation into the gallery of sand, rocks, and other debris from the wilds of New

Jersey, Slotawa’s series effaces the distinctions between private and public and between an artist’s home life and studio practice. (It is striking how different Slotawa’s series feels from its intellectual kin, *Haus ur* [House u r], 1985–, Gregor Schneider’s ongoing dark, psychologically fraught exploration of the domestic sphere.) These considerations, as well as the peekaboo relationship of each individual “*Besitzarbeit*” object to

the art world and the art market are perhaps the most distinctive and intellectually fruitful aspects of this series of installations. In other recent works, including his 2008 solo exhibition at Sies + Höke in Düsseldorf, it appears that Slotawa was able to effect a palpable tension between the exhibited objects and their context. Here, unfortunately, the lack of engagement with the site’s unique history and physical characteristics does a disservice to the engaging conceptual concerns of Slotawa’s practice.

—Brian Sholis



Florian Slotawa, *Besitzarbeit XII* (Property Work XII), 2009, mixed media. Installation view.