

Stefan Brüggenmann is keen on thinking up titles. So far he has compiled a list of 1,271 of them ('Show Titles vol. #1', 2000–6), creating for himself an index of imaginary exhibitions. One might begin, then, with the title of the present show: 'Soap Box (A Decorative Form of Nihilism)'. A 'soap box' would suggest political declarations, the arts of rhetoric and public address, perhaps even the pathos of outmoded ideals. 'A decorative form of nihilism'? Well, what else can one do with non-belief but inhabit it, display it as a mark of distinction, covering the walls with parerga abutting onto nothing in particular? We might describe Brüggenmann first as a rhetorician of emptiness. But, working in the tradition of the dandy, he has also succeeded in dramatizing boredom, which opens 'soap box' to a rather different, more private set of connotations.

For his recent exhibition Brüggenmann wallpapered the Kerlin space with the syntagm 'CONCEPTUAL DECORATION' repeated to the nth degree in 12 point Arial Black (the only font used by the artist). Flat blocks of text, without conjugation, without the slightest transmission, despite the use of clear signage, seal the walls of the gallery, petrifying whatever dynamic the phrase 'conceptual decoration' might otherwise possess. There are no folds into which one might be received, no thickening of images or clichés that would enable one to gain more purchase on what is obviously a highly sophisticated and meticulous obduracy.

Besides the black-on-white dazzle of this wallpaper – a quality that makes it exemplary of the technologies of enchantment and camouflage that Brüggemann uses throughout – its patterning also creates an acute depth of field, foregrounding the architecture of the Kerlin space. A similar sense of drama develops with his ‘Obliteration Works’ (2008–ongoing), where notepad scribbles are scaled up in neon and partially blacked out, so that they are staged against a backlit glow. Georges Perec once described off-hand gratuity as the guarantor of rigour. In keeping with what for Perec was an aesthetic principle, Brüggemann takes the scribble through what the writer describes as ‘a series of events which when concatenated nullify each other’. This inscription, then, does not allow for a familiar swell of meaning to arise from the artist’s gesture: as an event, it is uncommunicative and unfathomable, despite the breadth of the stage that it clears for itself. The experience of one who encounters the peculiarity of such a scribble precisely rendered, or of one who is bedazzled, is an experience that approaches giddiness and horror.

It could be argued that some current forms of art practice are engaged in discovering the inevitable, extracting singularity from banality in order to bring about the return of the new. In the light of these demands two actions recur in Brüggemann’s work that suggest the rudiments of a response: the first is reversal or, perhaps more fittingly, perversion (a statement turned back on itself, for instance, or a declaration that declares its own failure); the second is erasure

(for example, partially blacked-out neon or over-painted enlarged digital prints featuring a mixture of the artist's own photos and found pop imagery, as in his series of six 'Obliteration Works' on show here, all 2008). Both of these actions develop into formulae, the latter for a process of editing that brings about a pause amid the breathless succession of fashion imagery, negation serving to render unique the otherwise infinitely reproducible, and the former for something approaching the strategic distribution of vacancy, indifference and silence.

Brüggemann's relationship to silence seems especially potent. His work in neon makes text emphatically visual and so, one might think, turns it towards an experience of what is unsayable, silent: something seen but of which we cannot speak. Too easily, though, can we oppose silence to noisy language: it is more difficult to learn how to outplay silence. Brüggemann does just that. His accomplishment is to make speechlessness legible in the material of language itself. He makes statements idle, stubborn, foreign to themselves. One of the neon image-texts in the show consists of the statement: I CAN'T EXPLAIN. Is such a declaration made in desperation, as a dismissal, with contempt? No inflection is given: none is needed. The formality of its font betrays no bias or persuasion. Its indifference keeps it light on its feet. The artist, then, is not responsible before his audience; he is not ethically bound to say 'I can', to bear witness or provide disclosure. What matters is rather the cultivation of an attitude that delights in what is unproductive and a style that corresponds only in

dead letters. It is rare to encounter such clarity in our passage through the twilight of non-belief.