

Archival remains and ‘rudderless curiosity’ with Christopher Williams at Neubauer

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Early on in Franz Xaver Kroetz’s 1972 radio play “Inklusive,” Bavarian vacationers Anna and Karl find themselves exhausted after a long car ride to the Italian coast. It’s day one of a two week all-inclusive holiday, their newborn is at home under the watchful gaze of a grandparent, and it’s the first time they’re truly alone since the birth. After settling in, Anna remarks on the similarities between Italy to Bavaria: the clouds look the same, they lead the same lives, and even “when we wake up tomorrow, we won’t even know where we are, that’s how lovely it is.” Scenes of non-recognition and the false promise of respite pepper the radio play, the central set piece in the latest show at the Neubauer Collegium, “Christopher Williams: Radio/Rauhauser/Television.”

For the exhibition, the Los Angeles-born Williams fixates on the lesser known neo-realistic radio plays of Kroetz, a writer, banana-cutter, hospital orderly and fledging actor for the German working class in the late 20th century — and one of the most popular 20th century playwrights in Germany. Curator Dieter Roelstraete divided the show across two rooms: two German-language video works encroach into the entry foyer, while the majority of the art is displayed in the main gallery space.

Rather than solely original works, Roelstraete has crafted a setting of Williams and Kroetz' archives, surrounding the censorship of "Inklusive," which is being sporadically broadcast on 105.5 FM (Chicago's Lumpen Radio). The brief play, rewritten for distinct East and West Berlin audiences and censors, trades on the logic of obscure characters: readers are never quite sure how healthy, loving, or engaged our central couple is. Across the play's seven scenes, the banalities of holiday travel — Did we leave anything at home? How much does everything cost? — gas prices and the exploitation of German workers come to the fore. Strewn across the inane babble of dialogue lays the humdrum fetish of the everyday, which displaces the emotional and material abuses of life. As the couple astutely bemoans the inescapable fact of their final day in Italy: "Fourteen days is fourteen days."

While the text of the play is available online in Williams' new English translation, it is noticeably absent from the Neubauer; only a page of contextless English-language dialogue from the end of the play is visible. The exhibition text notes that "radio plays should be played, ideally, on radio alone — much like films, ideally should be screened in movie theaters alone." That the central focus, the ostensible motivation behind the exhibition, is physically absent suggests the absence at the heart of the exhibition, which is itself about a minor instance of censorship in German labor history. An event, which itself was censored and difficult to witness, and now is laid bare, if in dormant form, to the audience at the Neubauer.

And yet, in spite of such trivialities, the exhibition features the extant detritus of the initial "Inklusive" broadcast in 1972 as well as the censored post-broadcast talkback for another Kroetz play, featuring members of the German Communist Party (and friends of Kroetz, inciting anti-communist tirades). The custom-made virtines, which feature historical newspaper articles, transcripts of design details, moodboard-style stills from period German films, books and miniatures of Williams' works, welcome viewers into the world of 1970s Germany, while cutting them off from full immersion into this world. Books lay closed or open to a salient page, with the promise of informational riches just out of view. No explanatory text walks attendees through the various archival materials, forcing them to read through it all to determine which items contribute to the narrative, and which merely provide helpful context — or simply abandon the quixotic promise of full knowledge.

Surrounding the central vitrines are four hand-printed glass signs, which describe and rhyme with the content of the curated archive: "MODEL (David Zwirner, 34 East 69th Street, New York, NY, 10021)," "Blocking Template: Ikea Kitchen (Three-quarter). Studio Thomas Borho, Oberkasseler Str. 39, Düsseldorf, Germany, September 10, 2022," "Untitled (Provisional Prop)" and "Blocking Template: Ikea Kitchen (Three-quarter). Studio Thomas Borho, Oberkasseler Str. 39, Düsseldorf, Germany, September 10, 2022." The last of these signs is displayed on a makeshift and freestanding wall, fabriced over with period-influenced cotton wallpaper, "Rauhfaser, "steeped in social semantics." The

makeshift status of the wall, mirrored by its rough texture, bespeaks the fragility of social relations, financial stability, and uncensored aesthetic production. The enclosure of the space by these four textual images seals in a sense of the vivid and the absent.

Also included in those virtines are film stills from Straub-Huillet's "The Bridegroom, The Actress, and The Pimp," a 1968 Fassbinder-inspired triptych short with a middle section that features an extended theater set piece. In between material relics of the era, detailed plans for theatrical sound design, Williams' own photo works and these intertexts, the exhibition presents a slice of an already receding past, papered over with political ideologies, violences and repressions. Lost amid the paper archive of Kroetz lies the bitter absurdities of his scripts, never fully divorcing satire from their unrelenting depictions of everyday chatter.

In the exhibition's refusal to present traditional artworks as artworks, it forces the viewer into the position of curator, charting their own path through the documentary record, itself only offering a partial view of the past. It's less a vision of the past that can be inhabited than it is one that can only be visited. It's like an Italian beach, if someone were to spend the hours toiling in the car to arrive there, and discover the same view as could be seen at home. And amid these layers of repression, editing and censorship, a view of the past, which is unattainable and distant, emerges and encourages audiences to chart their own viewing experience through the "rudderless" expanse of possibility.

"Christopher Williams: Radio/Rauhauser/Television" runs through April 19 at the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society.