

KASPAR MÜLLER

MAINTENANCE

December 21, 2017 - January 27, 2018

There's a lot to see in Kaspar Müller's second exhibition at Federico Vavassori: works from previous shows that were in storage, newly produced artworks, and an accumulation of objects from his atelier in Berlin. For the exhibition, he almost completely cleared out his atelier and shipped it to the gallery. A thinker-smiley with a pencil in hand stares aggressively back at us. Is it a stand-in for the artist, and what scheme is he plotting? At first glance, the installation has something enigmatic about it. The assemblage places us in a unique position: It's as if we find ourselves in the studio, peering over the artist's shoulder. At the same time, it appears to be an archaeological site of the present moment with objects from all registers of the worlds of art and consumer goods. Kaspar Müller grants us a great stake in the process by which his art develops meaning.

On two tables set up in the gallery stand fragments of the atelier. On the walls: reclaimed wooden boards that have been painted and sanded – generic, abstract zombie formalism – as well as an older work by Müller (*After Julian Opie, 2013*). This rather dry room is reminiscent of the artist studios sometimes found rebuilt in museum contexts. The charged, mythical site of production is, instead, shown here in its profane banality; nevertheless, the viewer is prevented from arriving at a putative nucleus of the artist's practice. Regardless whether it's constructed and fake or not. Various barrier gates and poles from construction sites (see title) have been distributed throughout the gallery. We also find a luxurious, handblown glass object in the form of a traffic cone – a reference to Italian design. In their everyday uses, these objects indicate demarcations; they serve to keep people out of areas where they aren't allowed. Hanging on the walls in the first two rooms are small mirrors, which have had printouts of photos from the artist's perso-

nal archive pasted onto them. They show family members, some older works of his, and snapshots of daily life. The mirrors make the room appear larger and create doubles of the objects on display as well as viewers. In the process, viewers' perception is affected, viewers become more aware of their movements in the room, and they themselves are put on display. The photo printouts, however, break these reflections – in a way jamming the transmission emanating from the image's own support, making viewers wish that they could look past the affixed photos.

In the exhibition, time and again it is unclear who authored certain objects. Are these things that the artist made, or are they readymades? Müller intersperses sometimes inconspicuous handmade items within his assemblages, such as small, tin-cast objects or colorful drinking glasses, into which he poured acrylic paints. Primary colors play an important role in the exhibition: bright and vibrant hues like orange, green, red, and yellow give the exhibition an aggressive quality, almost toxic. In the last room of the gallery towers a shelving unit like those in storage rooms and hardware stores – a work that has appeared in different variations in several of Müller's exhibitions (i.e. Frankfurt Freakout in Museum im Bellpark, Kriens, 2015). The shelf sculpture is loaded with blank CDs, a data storage device that connotes the beginnings of information's dematerialization and which, through increasing dematerialization, quickly became an obsolete medium.

The title of the exhibition, *Maintenance*, has a broad range of meanings and denotes financial benefits supporting one's livelihood as well as upkeep in the field of technical infrastructure. The French roots of the term are *la main*, meaning 'the hand', and *tenir*, 'to grasp, to hold, to maintain'. Kaspar Müller understands maintenance as a transitional phase in which things are taken in hand as an emphatic gesture of preservation – mainly in combination with a tool. Maintenance, for him, is a metaphor for dealing with objects, in which there is no final mode of existence and the order of things remains ephemeral and dynamic. In the process, symbolic hierarchies soften and are reconfigured.

This also evokes the figure of the artist as bricoleur, who acts based on the existing inventory of things. Maintenance can be understood as a strategy in which one works with the material at hand; with the things surrounding us and also with the means of production that are available in the immediate environment (the photographic printouts on the mirrors and wooden boards, for example, were printed in a nearby shop in the Neukölln neighborhood of Berlin).

The title might also allude to the process of maintaining art. Kaspar Müller's show, which looks like a site of production, is not an asymmetrical encounter, where we watch as an artist ostentatiously unfurls his or her idiosyncratically formulated universe of symbols, his or her Merzbau. The relationship to a real person and his or her environment and experience is kept and constructed on a meta-level. Many of these objects used to belong to other people, were hoarded by anonymous individuals, and made several detours along the way here – which perhaps explains why Müller's exhibition also possesses a somewhat dark or ghostly character. It almost feels like being confronted with objects living an afterlife in the gallery, now that they have fallen out of the normal circulation of consumer goods. Müller combines these simultaneously disparate objects with culturally validated objects and with his own artworks. As a result, he generates a loop in meaning, a new syntax, in which all of the objects in the exhibition become linked to each other semantically. It is a system of meaning in which unique, metastasizing relationships can arise, since the objects have been released from their original contexts. Or, as Kaspar Müller explains: "The moment when everything suddenly seems connected and appealing – interesting – is an exciting moment. You don't want to let hell break loose, but you might want to taste it."

Arthur Fink
(translated by John Beeson)