

MAPS OF NOTHING

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Assuming it were possible for every single word that has been written since the very beginning of writing to be contained on one surface, how much space would that occupy? How many layers would that fill? The nature of the material used by Stephanie Stein immediately evokes its most widespread use: writing. Graphite comes with a specific range of references but, our way of thinking is already stuck in the intricate realm of language. The ambiguity of language reigns and there is nothing we can do to free ourselves from it. Philosophy has always tried to define a possible structure, a universal law that could codify the intangible relationship between a word and its scientifically proved significance. But it is precisely this ambiguity that makes discussion possible, and that, ideally, could be accumulated in layers of written words.

Stephanie Stein's exhibition *Rein und Rausland* at Sauvage, Düsseldorf, presents a rigorous selection of her latest works.

Upon entering the first room of the exhibition space, one is confronted by a large grid of nine square panels depicting a monochrome landscape. A huge map of nothing at first glance, but as one looks at it an overwhelming feeling of comfort slowly begins to arise and potential interpretations are revealed.

The viewer is standing in front of a two-dimensional work but its polished surface awakens another sense that completes the experience. Even without touching the work, its texture evokes soft connotations. The title of the work, *90-60-90*, is a direct reference to the canonic measurements of the perfect female body, a numerical definition of an obsolete and sadly standard way of identifying ideal beauty. The superficiality of such an example of male chauvinism is underlined here and somehow dissolved in the landscape of possibilities suggested by Stein's work. Layers of graphite are pressed onto the aluminum support and the surface of each of the nine panels is sanded several times. The entire process creates an oscillation between discovering and hiding, an accumulation that releases a powerful silence. This silence is just like the confrontation with the primordial language of nature, which create a figurative enantiosemy by containing everything and nothing.

The natural landscape that has shaped Stephanie Stein's formative years has the intense characteristic of rawness; the ground at the edge of the ocean creates a gap like a cut in the scenery that reveals all its unquestionable truth, one that artificial language will never be able to grasp. But nature does, and so the geological origin of graphite seems to perfectly represent the archetype of language explored by Stein, communicating a deep sense of immanence. As Marcus Steinweg so aptly summarized: Stein delicately and persistently explores with her geometries of determinacy and indeterminacy spaces that create emancipation from reality.

In *Condition*, another work presented at the show, the use of graphite keeps us in this undetermined space, but the clear definition of the architectural element of the classical Greek column as a horizontal portion of the surface gives us the possibility of holding onto something more decipherable. The image suggested by the use of such a specific element pushes us to another aspect of Stein's work that concerns her research: politics.

The definition of the self in a social context is a natural and necessary aspect of human development in our civilized world. Leaning toward the philosophy of Hannah Arendt, Stephanie Stein's artistic investigation of political self-definition relies on Arendt's belief that the self needs to

be emancipated from its private life, family, group, and origin in order to accept the risk of being exposed to others for the love of a world inhabited by unique people.

The critique regarding the use of numbers as a measurement of achievement in *90-60-90* becomes even more political when viewed from this perspective. The meaning of existence for each human being comes by affirming a freedom that is basically the power of initiative and innovation, the ability to express oneself and to take responsibility for one's actions, transforming the context of relationships, traditions, and established rules that construct reality around us in a place of a common grounding of experiences, of sharing a common destiny. Politics is to enhance the human condition as a condition of plurality.

The title of the exhibition, *Rein und Rausland*, is also the title of a video collage in the exhibition that shows large dust clouds growing in the air filmed from the rear window of a rapidly moving car. This loop is overlaid by a scene from Elio Petri's movie *La classe operaia va in paradiso* where a neon light is broken and falls down as a result of the rebellious actions of the factory's workers against the capitalistic power represented by the owners. This movement of breaking lights and falling shards creates a strong contrast with the images of the dust rising from the escaping car. The divergence suggested by the images is reflected in the title of the work and in the similar sounding choice of words. Once again, the 'in and out' intellectual movement that Stein confidently uses as the expression of her own artistic language represents the conflict experienced by the human condition experiences We are constantly finding ourselves in the position of having to choose from many possibilities, our free will is both a tool for escape and a trap, and defining a possible space where a choice has not yet been made, where language is still pure and not corrupted by its use, remains at the heart of Stephanie Stein's research.

The repetition of a historical image of playing children in a brutalist playground surrounded and delimited by large marble elements, printed twice with the silkscreen letters I on one and O on the other, is the element in the exhibition that condenses the vast philosophical wandering of the self: *IO* — the Italian word for I — is spelled on the image of our innocence. A Pasolinian image of an incorruptibility that is represented by characters lacking a specific identity, petrified by their sweetness, moving between acceptance and resistance.